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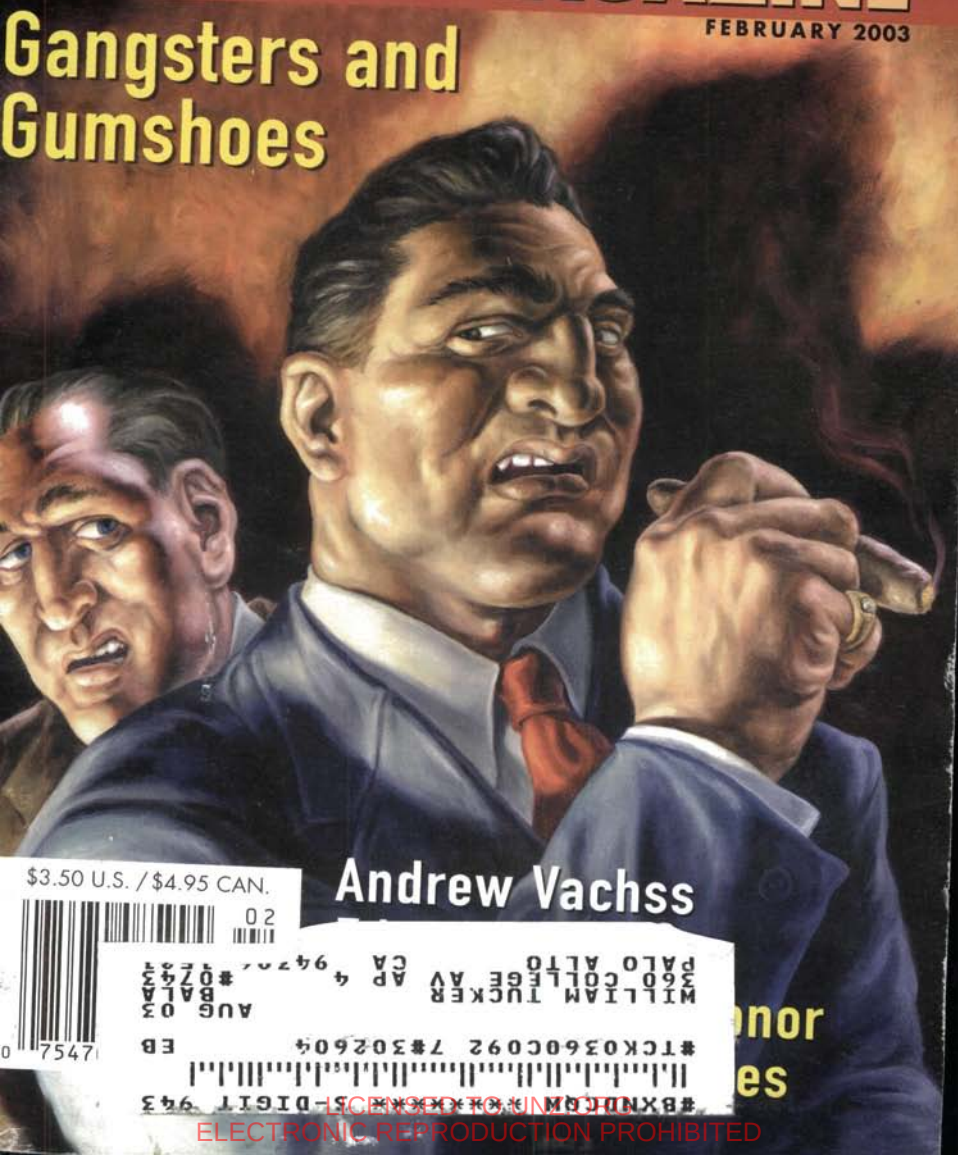

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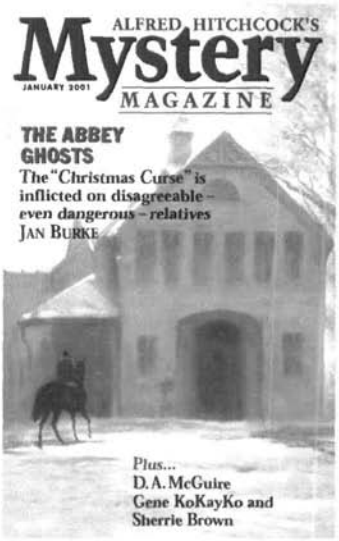

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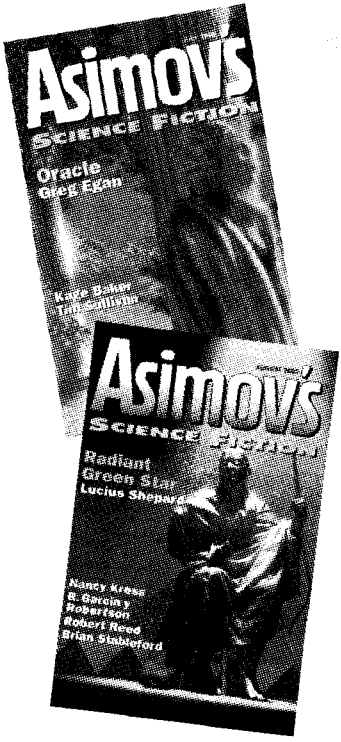

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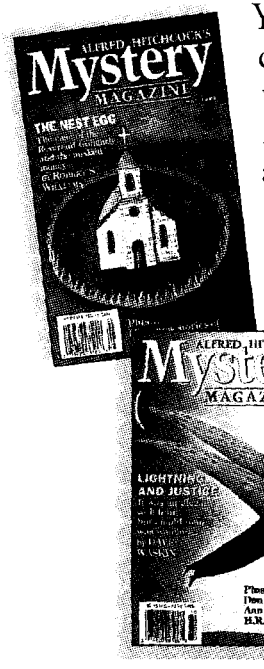

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

DEAR MR. HOLMES

by Steve Hockensmith

The Strand Magazine
George Newnes Ltd.
3 to 13 Southampton Street
Strand, London, England

Dear Mr. Holmes,

This is my third crack at writing this letter, and by God I'm going to get through it this time come Hell or high water. If Gabriel himself were to come down and blow on his bugle before I'm done, I'd just turn around and tell him, "Hold your horn, Gabe, I'm writing a letter to Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

Part of my difficulty with this chore is that my book learning amounts to five years in a country school and two years clerking for a granary in Peabody, Kansas. And my brother Gustav's got four years less on the schooling and not a day wielding a clerk's pencil, yet *he*'s trying to tell *me* how to write this letter.

Somehow I doubt if you're looking over that Watson fellow's shoulder when he's trying to write about you. But my brother is not a refined gentleman like yourself. So if you notice any bloodstains on

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the paper as you read this, you'll know he stuck his big nose in one time too many and I had to give it a good punch.

Now I've read about your way with "deductions," so perhaps I don't need to introduce myself before I get to the nub of the matter. I can just see you taking one good whiff of this letter and saying to yourself, "This was sent by a cowboy—one who needed a good bath!" And you would be right. My name is Otto Amlingmeyer, I am what they call a "cowboy" working the Old Western Trail from Texas to Montana, and yes, I suppose I could use a good dunking—but not until I've written "And that's how it all happened, I swear on my dust-covered soul. Sincerely, O.A. Amlingmeyer."

Kicking off our yearly celebration of the birthday of Sherlock Holmes is a cowboy whodunit featuring some early fans of the great sleuth. "It was a real hoot to write, and I'm sure Big Red and Old Red haven't ridden off into the sunset for good," says author Steve Hockensmith. For more pertaining to the Holmes anniversary, see pages 98, 99, and 122.

You being an uncommonly educated fellow and all, you surely don't put any stock in those dime novels about cowboy life. The way they tell it, your average drover spends his days fighting off fifty Comanche braves with one hand and untying a beautiful gal from the railroad tracks with the other, all the while with a lit stick of dynamite clenched in his teeth, pearl-handled six-guns in his holster, and a horse that dances the Texas two-step every time he whistles "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain." Sure, we have plenty of adventures when we're on the trail, as long as your idea of an "adventure" is pulling a steer out of a sinkhole or throwing rocks at coyotes so they won't sneak into camp at night and eat your boots.

But on our latest cattle drive, my brother and I finally have had a genuine dime novel-type adventure. And we only lived to tell about it because of you.

"Ahhh!" I can hear you say. "At last! The point!"

You'll have to excuse me. I'm used to yarning around a campfire, where the idea is to keep your lips flapping as long as possible so as to better distract your pals from how cold, tired, and miserable they are. If I try to write this letter that way, they'll have to cut down all the trees in Kansas just to make enough paper for me to get the job done. So I'd better just get to it.

Gustav and I first became acquainted with you and your reputation as a puzzle-breaker about three months ago. He and I had just made the trip down to Brownsville, Texas, to meet up with an old compadre of ours by the name of Charlie Higgebottom. Charlie was fixed to be caporal of a big drive—three thousand Mexican long-

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horns headed up through Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming to the Blackfeet Agency up around Billings, Montana. That's as long as the Big Trail ever gets, so Charlie needed the best cow- and horsemen he could lay hands on. Charlie's been on enough drives with us to know that we can both handle cattle, so naturally he sent word that we should come along.

Now to Charlie and most of the other bull nurses we know, Gustav and I aren't "the Amlingmeyer brothers." I guess that just doesn't slide off the tongue easy as it should. So instead we're "Big Red" and "Old Red," or just "the Reds," on account of our strawberry-red heads of hair. I'm Big Red for reasons a deep thinker such as yourself can surely work out. But my brother's Old Red not so much for his age (though at twenty-six he is a bit long in the tooth for a cowpuncher) as much as for his personality. Gustav's never cottoned much to japes or tomfoolery. He's a quiet fellow, always looking serious and a little down in the mouth—what you might call morose, like a dog you just kicked off the foot of your bed.

So to move along in the direction of that *point* I should be steering towards, maybe three days into this latest drive, when most of the hands were circled up around the fire after getting the herd bedded down for the night, Charlie pulled something out of his saddlebag and gave it to me. It was one of those story magazines, though not one I'd ever laid eyes on before.

"I've been holding on to this for eight weeks," Charlie said. "Found it on a bench at the railroad station in San Antonio and figured it was the hand of fate. I had to hold on to it till I saw the Reds again."

I didn't know what he was working his jaw about until I opened it up and started flipping through the pages. About halfway through the magazine, I came across a story you know well—"The Red-Headed League."

The title alone got a chuckle out of me. I read it out loud for Gustav (who can't tell his *A*s from his *Z*s or anything in between), but he just grunted. The boys around the fire got a fine laugh from it, though, and they called out for me to read the whole story. Now along the trail I've got a reputation for oratory and poetry reciting and song singing and such, being under-blessed on modesty and powerful over-blessed on lung power. So I grabbed a lantern off the commissary and cleared my throat and gave the fellows a regular night at the theater.

Well, you'll have to tell that Dr. Watson he's a top-rail yarn spinner. The boys ate it up like it was hot donuts on Christmas morning. They were hooting and joshing me and Gustav fierce when they heard that burro milk about the locoed American tycoon giving away money to redheads. Not a one of them figured out it was just a bad man's scheme, and when you caught the rascal red-

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handed (so to speak) trying to dig his way into a bank, they cheered and clapped like you were right there with us doing backflips.

Now usually the flannelmouthed whopper-swapping you'll hear around a cowboy campfire puts my brother straight to sleep. And for a minute or two I thought "The Red-Headed League" would be just another lullaby as far as he was concerned. But when I got to the part where you told that pawnbroker everything there was to know about himself—where he'd been and what he'd done and who he was, just from looking at him—Gustav perked up right smart. His eyes got all wide in a way I'd never seen, picking up the light from the fire and glowing like the big eyes of a hoot owl. But though he was staring straight at me, I knew he didn't see me or the campfire or the boys gathered around it. What he saw was you and Dr. Watson and that pawnbroker and everything else in the story. When I finished, he even applauded along with the rest of the boys, which was peculiar indeed since a show of enthusiasm from Gustav is about as common as a six-legged mule or an honest bartender.

That dreamy-like look stayed on Old Red's face all the next day. And when we were gathered around the fire that night, he asked me to read the story again. Well, I rarely turn down an opportunity to practice my elocution, so I pulled out that magazine and gave it my all. As you might imagine, the fellows didn't get quite so worked up about it the second time, though they did give it a good listen. Gustav, on the other hand, was mesmerized. The next night, he asked me to read it *again,* but (no offense, now) the boys wouldn't stand for it. They got to stretching the blanket about ornery beeves they'd seen—a puncher by the name of Tornado Monroe even claimed a steer pulled a knife on him once—and Gustav got up and wandered away, as he will when the proceedings are not to his interest and he's not ready to sleep.

Now when you're working a herd all day long, you don't have time to work your gums at anybody who doesn't have hooves, which is why I hadn't had a chance to ask my brother why "The Red-Headed League" had him all google-eyed. So after listening to a few more whoppers from the boys, I got up and went looking for him. I found him out by the picket line, where we had our night horses hobbled. He was staring up at the black night sky like a coyote getting ready to let loose with a yodel. "They're called stars," I said. "Don't worry—they ain't going to fall on you."

Of course, that didn't even get a smile out of Old Red, though sometimes I can get him tickled if no one's around.

"What are you out here pondering on, old-timer?"

He just shrugged, looking kind of embarrassed.

"Now, come on, brother. You know you can unshuck your lips with me. That magazine story has got a fierce grip on your head, hasn't it?"

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He nodded slowly, real thoughtful-like. "Yup, I s'pose it has," he said, speaking just as slowly. "It's that Holmes feller—his whole way of lookin' at things."

"What about it?"

"Well, you know I like a man can think straight. And he seems to be the straightest thinker I ever heard of."

"So you admire the man."

"More than that. Hearin' about him makes me wonder. You know . . . well, you know about my schoolin'. . . ."

Gustav got to looking all bashful again. He can be a mite prickly about his lack of letters. It's always seemed to sting him that our dear old mama had him working the fields while the younger kids got to go to school.

"I know," I said.

"Well, the thing about it is, he don't need no book-learnin' to do what he does. He didn't catch them bank-robbin' snakes with some trick he learned at a university. He caught 'em cuz he knows how to *look* at things—look and really see 'em."

I shrugged. "I guess you're right. So?"

"So, seems any man could do the same, he put his mind to it."

Now I'm ashamed to admit I laughed when I saw what he was driving at.

"I know you're sharper than you look, big brother, but I don't think you could beat this Sherlock Holmes in any war of wits."

Gustav gave me his best scowl—the one that makes a rabid badger look downright friendly by comparison.

"I don't aim to beat him," he said. "I just think he's worth studyin' on, that's all. Seems like he don't do nothin' but sit around and cogitate and *whammy*—things happen. Whereas fellers like you and me and the boys back there, we never think at all, just *do,* and we don't get no whammy at all."

"Cowpunchin' ain't a thinker's game."

"Don't I know it."

The bitterness in his voice put a little cramp in my grin. I knew he longed for better things than riding herd on someone else's cattle. And part of the reason he couldn't get those things was because he'd always had younger brothers and sisters to look out for. Now most of them were dead or married off, and only one was left for him to nursemaid—the baby of the family, Yours Truly.

Looked at a certain way, I owed him everything I had, right down to the boots on my big feet. So who was I to poke fun?

"Tell you what, brother. Tomorrow night I'll borrow the lantern off the chuck wagon and you and I can come out here and visit with Mr. Sherlock Holmes again."

That got me a glimpse of that rarest of prairie critters, the Gustav Amlingmeyer Smile. I went back to the fire after that. He and

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I had second watch that night, which meant we'd be back up on our mounts by two o'clock in the morning. I wouldn't have time for forty winks, but I could still catch me maybe eighteen if I turned in right quick. I left Gustav there by the horses, looking up at the sky like he'd never seen it before. I found him there still when I came back a few hours later.

Over the next three weeks, I read him "The Red-Headed League" a dozen more times. I finally stopped when I noticed his lips forming the words before I could speak them.

"You've got this thing memorized!" I said.

"Only the important bits."

"Well, then, you don't need to hear 'em anymore."

After that, we took a little holiday from Dr. Watson's story. Truth to tell, I'd become mighty sick of it myself, fine though it is. Reading it over and over was like having steak for dinner every night. Sooner or later, a man's going to pine for a plate of beans. So for the next few weeks, there was no more talk of Sherlock Holmes—though every so often I would see Gustav's mouth working as he rode along, and at times it seemed like he couldn't keep his mind on his steers. That won my brother some jibes from the other fellows, who joshed him that he was going soft in the head in his old age. I knew what he was thinking on, of course, but I kept that to myself.

By this point we'd crossed the Red River and were deep into Indian territory. Now, no matter what you may read over there in England, we don't have big Indian wars like we used to. That was all ironed out not too long after Custer and his boys got themselves turned into pincushions. But cowboys have still got to watch their backsides on Indian land—especially when there's Comanches and Kiowas on the prowl. They might not steal many scalps these days, but they do surely love to steal cattle.

Charlie Higgebottom doubled up the night watch the day we got across the Red River, so there were four of us out under the moon at all times while the rest of the outfit slept. Now "the rest of the outfit" amounted to just eight men, not counting Charlie and our cook, Greasy Pete Tregaskis. We weren't overstocked for hands, since delivering beeves to an Indian agency, as we were doing, is not the most profitable drive a fellow can undertake. So we were all of us a little droopy in the saddle, overworked and dying of thirst for a good night's sleep. Sometimes a nightmare would make me jump, and I'd wake to find myself on my horse, on watch.

That's just what happened this one particular night, except it wasn't any nightmare that woke me up. It was gunshots. And if that hadn't been enough to snap me out of the land of Nod, the stampede would have done just as well, for you can't go firing off a six-shooter at night without spooking the herd something fierce. When they get spooked, they run. And when they run, we have to ride after them.

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The chase took hours. I spent most of that time trying not to end up something sticky on the bottom of a thousand steers' hooves. This was only my third drive, you see, so I didn't have the stampede-breaking know-how of a Gustav or a Charlie Higgebottom. I spurred up toward the front just once, to make sure my brother wasn't already worm bait a few miles back. There he and Charlie were, riding right alongside the lead steers, trying to convince them the world wouldn't come to an end if they stopped running. That would be a difficult thing to do, I knew, since cows are second only to rocks as the dumbest things God ever created. So I left them to it, dropping back where it was safer and I could do more good, along the right flank with a couple of the other punchers trying to keep our big herd from turning into five hundred little herds.

When it was all over, the steers dropped down to the ground to take a much-needed nap. Pretty soon they were snoring under the early-morning sun like nothing ever happened. Cowboys aren't as lucky in such matters as cows, however. There's no rest for us after a stampede peters out. You've got to fan out and round up the strays. I was fixing to bear down on a couple of loose steers when Gustav and Charlie rode up, both of them looking like they had a mouthful of something a dog wouldn't eat.

"Did you see what started all this?" Charlie snapped at me.

"Well, it's good to see y'all, too. Your concern for my well-being has me just about all teared up," I said. "And no, I didn't see what started this. I just heard someone set his gun a-goin' and before I knew it I was up to my neck in beef."

"How about Billy and Peanuts?" Gustav asked. "You seen 'em?"

"No. I haven't seen 'em since . . ."

And then I realized why Charlie and Gustav looked so riled. Billy and Peanuts—alias Bill Brown and Conrad Emicholz—were the two fellows out on watch the same time as Gustav and me.

"Nobody else has seen 'em?"

Charlie shook his head. Gustav sighed.

"I'll go back and look for them," my brother said. He nodded at me. "Mind if I take him with me?"

Charlie looked thoughtful for a moment. "Yup, maybe you better." And he wheeled his horse and rode off after those longhorns I'd been aiming at.

"So, little brother . . . I'm glad to see you didn't get yourself killed last night," Gustav said.

"Well, that just about sums up my feelings upon seeing you," I said.

Gustav nodded. "All right, then." That's about as sentimental as he ever gets. "Let's go get us some fresh horses."

Once we had our new mounts, we headed back down the trail, Gustav riding the eastern side, me riding the western side. We

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saw a few strays, but no Billy and no Peanuts. A couple miles back we ran into the commissary hurrying to catch up with the herd. We asked Greasy Pete, our outfit's biscuit rustler, if he'd seen the boys. He hadn't. Before we rode on, Gustav asked if he could get a shovel and a scattergun out of the wagon.

"You expectin' to use those?" asked Greasy Pete.

"Wouldn't ask for 'em if I didn't," Gustav said.

This shovel and shotgun talk was making me jumpy as a jackrabbit, but I tried not to let on. I never could hide a thing from my brother, though. When Greasy Pete pulled out the scattergun for him, Gustav handed it over to me. He knew I'd take comfort from a piece of heavy artillery across my saddle.

About a half-hour after we left the chuck wagon, we found ourselves back where it all started—the spot where we'd had the herd bedded down for the night. The trail was plain as can be, being a quarter-mile wide and flat as a riverbed. There was some brush and trees on the western side, more brush and a small rocky bluff on the eastern side. "I was round about here, up toward the point, when those shots went off," Gustav said. "How about you?"

"I'm not sure. It was mighty dark," I said, not adding that it was so dark because I had my eyes closed at the time. "I think I must've been up toward the point, too. Seemed like pretty near the whole herd tried to plow me under once they got to runnin'."

Gustav took his horse to a slow trot. He was headed for the rocks to the east. That made sense to me. It was the best place around for jumping a man. I followed, my palms slicking up the shotgun with sweat. As we rounded the bluff, I caught sight of something red pressed up against the gray rock. It looked to be a man. I stopped my horse and brought up the shotgun.

"Gustav," I said.

"I see him," my brother said. "Hey, Peanuts! I sure hope that's you!"

There was no answer—no sound, no movement, nothing. Gustav unholstered his six-gun and fired off a shot into the sky. The red shape was as still as the rock around it. Gustav climbed down off his horse.

"Come on," he said.

I dismounted and followed. I kept the shotgun leveled at the quiet fellow, though with the buzzing of flies growing louder as we approached I didn't much expect him to kick up any kind of fuss.

It was Peanuts all right. He was in the same red calico shirt he'd been wearing the past two months. The red was darker now, though—soaked through with blood from his open belly and mangled scalp and empty eye sockets. He was propped up against the rock like he'd just leaned back to enjoy a little siesta in the shade. Billy was next to him, barked up just as bad. I did some colorful cursing of the Kiowas, the Comanches, the Apaches, and every

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other tribe under the skies. Gustav took it all more calm-like, which is his way when faced with the alarming or the unpleasant.

"Well," he said, "now we know why the buzzards couldn't lead us straight to 'em. If the boys had been left out under the sun, they'd be just about picked clean by now." He kicked a clod of chewed-up sod thrown up by the stampede. "Or they would've been churned into butter by all those hooves."

I turned, still cursing like thunder, and went to get back on my horse.

"What do you think you're doin'?" Gustav called after me.

"I'm gonna track down those murderin' sons of bitches and give 'em a taste of what they gave Billy and Peanuts. What do *you* think *you're* doin'?"

"I'm buryin' the boys and then I'm headed back up to join the outfit. And that's what you're going to do, too. That's what *I* think."

"But—"

"As long as you're headed over there, you may as well grab the shovel off my horse and get to usin' it. I think this is as good a place as any to lay the boys down."

I did as I was told, though I cursed and kicked about it. As I got to work piling up dirt, Gustav showed me the lay of things.

"Whoever did this has got a six-hour jump on us at least, little brother. They'll have some of our cattle with 'em for sure, and that'll slow 'em down. But it would still take us hours to track 'em and catch up. And then what? It's you and me and two exhausted horses against Lord only knows how many men. Nope. The only thing to do is give these two a proper burial and then go tell Charlie what happened."

I couldn't argue with the wisdom of it, but it didn't sit right, I can tell you that. I tried to work my anger into my shoveling, and I sure gave that ground a good beating. While I was digging, Gustav was hunched over the bodies, looking them over as casual as he would a couple of ponies he was thinking about buying. He even handled them, leaning them forward so he could see their backs.

"Why are you pawin' over them like that?" I finally asked him.

"Well," Gustav said, kind of reluctant-like, "just between you and me and the boys here, I'm wonderin' what Mr. Sherlock Holmes would make of all this."

That put a twig up my snoot, I confess. I hadn't known Billy and Peanuts very long, had never worked a drive with them before, but they were comrades just the same and it seemed disrespectful to be thinking about some magazine story when they hadn't even been planted yet.

"That Holmes feller might be a sharp tack on paper, but he ain't no Indian fighter," I said.

"You see, the thing is, though, whoever barked these heads cut

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'em up bad. Their scalps must've come off in four, five pieces. And—"

"Now ain't that a scandal?" I cut in, snorting like a steer with a knot in his tail. "The Kiowas ain't gettin' enough practice with their scalpin'! I guess you better just write yourself a letter of complaint to the Bureau of Indian Affairs."

Gustav shot a sour glare my way, then went back to inspecting the bodies and the ground around them. I plunged the shovel back into the earth, and neither one of us said a thing until it came time to settle the boys into the shallow little hole they were going to share for the rest of forever. Seeing as how I'd just about broken my back digging, I made Gustav do the dragging. He rolled Peanuts into the earth first, then went back for Billy. When we had the boys curled up together, we piled on a load of rocks so the coyotes wouldn't get at them. We didn't throw around any words of consecration, each of us still being vexed with the other and just Christian enough to know that men who hadn't been inside a church in ten years don't have any business playing preacher.

Before we headed out to hook up with the outfit again, Gustav had us do a little ride south. We'd barely gone a hundred feet when we came to a fresh trail pushing east through the brush.

"You still wanna go get yourself killed, you just ride that trail good and hard," Gustav said to me.

Our little brotherly spats tend to live and die within the span of an hour. I'm just not good at grudge-holding. So I was ready to patch things up by now.

"So what do you figure happened, big brother?" I asked.

"I'm still figurin'," Gustav said warily.

"Well, here's how I see it. A few wild bucks—renegades—they jumped Billy and Peanuts, cut out some cattle, then fired off a few shots to get a stampede goin'. They knew that'd scatter the rest of us while they skedaddled."

Gustav nodded slowly. "Makes sense."

"Sure it does. What other way would you reckon it?"

Instead of answering, Gustav pointed at the trail we'd just come across and asked a question of his own.

"What does that look like to you? Maybe a dozen head? Four or five horses?"

I'm not as good with trails as my brother. I can read English. He can read hoofprints. So it was best just to agree.

"That seems about right," I said. "So?"

Gustav just shook his head sadly, like he was puzzled how such a featherbrain came to be a blood relation. He turned his horse and kicked him into a gallop. I followed, and we were too busy riding to have any parley until we caught up with the herd a few hours later.

Charlie and the rest of the boys had finished rounding up strays and were doing a count—a mighty big undertaking when you've

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got three thousand animals to throw a number on. We reported what we'd found, and everybody put together the same story I had. Naturally, there was some talk about hunting down the dirty redskins who'd cut up Billy and Peanuts, but Charlie put a bullet through that notion pretty fast. Dodge City was two weeks north of us. When we went in for supplies there, we'd spread word of what had happened, but that was all that could be done. We'd lost only fifteen head to the raiders and the stampede, leaving three thousand steers to look after and just ten cowpunchers left to do it.

"If it were up to me, I'd let all you Indian fighters go get yourself bushwhacked," Charlie said. "But it's not up to me. It's up to our employer, the Lone Star Land and Cattle Company, Incorporated. And we know what they want: They want the job done. That's what we're here for and that's what we're gonna do. Any arguments?"

There weren't any, but there was more than a little grumbling. My brother kept out of it, though. He was even more tight-lipped than usual. He didn't open his mouth unless it was to stick some beans and bacon in it at suppertime. His eyes had gone kind of faraway and unfocused, like he didn't notice me, the boys, the cattle, the horse underneath his rump, nothing.

"Why's Old Red gone so quiet on us again?" Greasy Pete asked me the day after we buried Billy and Peanuts. "Did one of them Comanches cut out his tongue?"

All I could do was shrug. That very morning I'd asked Gustav what had him all hushed up and the only thing he'd say was, "I'm tryin' to introspect."

The next day, we *all* had something new to think on. Gustav and I were riding point up at the front of the herd, him on the right side, me on the left, both of us just behind Charlie, who as trail boss was usually a quick trot ahead leading the way. We were just loping along casual as can be, sloping low in our saddles, dreaming of rocking chairs and feather beds, when a sound bounced out of the air up ahead and straightened out our spines. It was a gunshot, not too far away by the sound of it. I turned to look at Gustav, and he was already yipping his horse into a gallop. I did likewise.

"What do you think?" Charlie asked once we'd come pounding to a halt next to him.

"Came from that washout up ahead there," Gustav said, pointing at something that didn't look like anything more than a streak of brown in the grass. But my brother's got eyes and ears as sharp as a razor blade, so I didn't doubt he was right.

Neither did Charlie. He pulled out his forty-five. "All right, Old Red. You and me'll ride on into it and see what we see. Big Red, you stay up top and hug the edge. Not too tight, though. If this is some kinda ambush, you'll be our ace in the hole."

"Or you'll be mine," I said, drawing out my own six-shooter.

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"Kinda depends on who gets ambushed where, don't it?"

"Only one way to find out," Gustav said, and on those cheerful words of parting we rode off.

There was a washout up ahead, just like my brother said. I waited a minute while he and Charlie worked their horses down into the dried-out creek bed, then I wheeled my mount to the west and trotted off. I stayed just close enough to the washout to follow the sound of hooves and the cloud of dust they kicked up.

After maybe five minutes of riding, the dust cloud stopped and drifted apart on the breeze as the hoofbeats came to a halt. I stopped, too, and heard words bounce up out of the gully.

"Easy there, mister," I heard Gustav say. "No need to go pullin' out any hardware."

I knew my brother wasn't really talking to whoever was down there with him and Charlie. He was talking to me, telling me what he saw. I slipped off my horse quiet as can be and slinked over to the washout's edge. Down below, just a few feet away, was a man standing next to a prone pinto. The dirt around the horse's head was black-red with blood. A saddle sat on the ground near the man's feet. He had a gun in his hand, and it was all set to go off in the general direction of my brother's belly.

"Who're you?" the man growled.

"Us? Oh, we're nobody. Just some drovers movin' through with some cattle," my brother said from up on his horse, sounding as cool as lemonade with ice. "Me and Charlie here—oh, my name's Gustav Amlingmeyer, by the by—we're headed up to Billings from Brownsville. Been out on the trail nearly two months. And how about yourself? Where you headed?"

Of course, this was uncommonly chatty for my brother. But he wasn't being sociable. He was giving me time to angle around behind the hombre with the gun.

"If you don't know, then it ain't none of your concern," the man said to my brother. The gun barrel wasn't angling down a hair. "Now why don't you two just get offa them horses."

Charlie and Gustav looked at each other, and Gustav gave a nod. "All right," he said. "We'll come on down. Won't we, little brother?"

Well, you couldn't ask for a plainer signal than that. I jumped, landing next to the man like a bag of hammers. I only got one hand on him, though, and he spun out of my grasp, off balance. But he looked a little dazed, and I managed to get my feet planted before he could bring his shooting iron back into the game. I threw a fist at him, and though it only seemed to graze his chin his head snapped back and his eyelids fluttered and his knees gave out from under him. He dropped the six-shooter and toppled backwards into the dirt next to the dead horse.

The stranger stayed down for a minute or two. By the time he

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sat up, shaking his head and rubbing his jaw, I had his own gun pointed at him.

"Hold on there, friend," he said. "Let's talk this over."

"Oh, I'm your friend, am I?" I said. "You sure are sociable now that the bullets are pointed in your direction."

"I didn't mean no offense before." He looked over my shoulder and tried an unconvincing smile on Gustav and Charlie, who had dismounted and stepped over for a closer look at our prisoner. "Y'all spooked me, that's all. I just got myself out of a mighty tough scrape and I didn't fancy the notion of another one so soon."

"What kinda scrape?" Charlie asked.

"The red-skinned kind," the man said. "I was headed up to Wichita and I ran into a war party. They—"

"War party?" Charlie broke in. "What kind? Kiowa? Comanche?"

"I didn't stop to ask. The way they lit out after me, I just figured they were the scalpin' kind."

Charlie and Gustav exchanged a glance. Charlie looked worried. My brother—well, he did a good job of not looking one thing or another.

"Go on," my brother said to the man. "What happened?"

"Well, they chased me half the night, poppin' off shots every time they got within a quarter-mile of me. They finally dropped away somewhere, but I wasn't takin' any chances. I reckoned this here arroyo was as good a place as any to hole up. Only I slipped off to sleep while I was waitin' for my last stand. When I woke up, I noticed that ol' Jimmy over there had picked up a bullet. You know how a good horse is—he can go for miles without letting on he's about to die. Well, he was sufferin' pretty bad, so I did the only thing I could do. The next thing I know, I've got men ridin' at me and fallin' out of the sky on me and throwin' punches at me. Is it any wonder a feller would get a little jumpy?"

"Not at all, not at all," Charlie said. He reached out and offered the man his hand. "No hard feelings, I hope. My name's Charlie Higgebottom."

The man gave Charlie's hand a shake, then let Charlie help him to his feet. "I'm Joe," he said. "Joe Sweet." He turned to face me. "And you're the feller with the big fist."

I grinned and nodded. "Sorry about that. Otto Amlingmeyer's the name, but the boys call me Big Red."

"I can't imagine why," Sweet joked as we shook hands.

While Sweet and Charlie and I were getting chummy, my brother had wandered over to Sweet's horse. He was giving the animal a sour look, like he expected it to hop up and start calling him names.

"Oh, that's Old Red, Otto's brother," Charlie said when Sweet turned toward Gustav. "Don't worry about the introductions. You won't hear five more words out of him the whole

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time you know him."

"Well, it's nice to meet you anyhow, Old Red," Sweet said.

My brother just looked up and grunted.

Charlie chuckled. "See? What'd I tell you?"

"So what'd you boys say you were doin' out here?" Sweet sucked a lungful of air through his nostrils. "Shoot. That's right. It's a wonder I didn't notice it before. There's a herd headed this way, ain't there?"

"Yes, sir. Three thousand head." Charlie proceeded to tell Sweet all about our drive, right up to and including what had happened to Billy and Peanuts. "You wouldn't be a cowpuncher, would you? We're a few hands down and we've got a long way to go."

"Well, I've roped me a few steers over the years," Sweet said. "Even worked a drive up to Cheyenne once. I'd be happy to ride with you for a spell."

"Good!" Charlie clapped Sweet on the back. "So here I am a foreman who needs himself a cowboy, and right here in the middle of nowhere I meet up with a cowboy who needs himself a horse. I guess I'm one lucky son of a bitch today."

Sweet grinned again. "That's what people always say after they meet me."

That got a good laugh out of me and Charlie, but my brother didn't even crack a smile. "Tell you what, Mr. Sweet," Gustav said once the guffaws had petered out. "You take my mount there and let Charlie show you what's what. My brother can grab me another horse from the remuda and ride it up here. I'll use your saddle for now and give it back to you tonight."

Sweet's grin slid off his face like eggs off a greasy frying pan. "Thank you for the offer, but I'd rather be the one to wait. I'm a touch particular about my saddles. The wrong one'll kink up my back somethin' awful."

"Oh, got yourself a special make, do you?" Gustav said. He crouched down next to the saddle lying in the dirt beside the horse. "Just looks like a regular California to me." He stretched out a hand toward the saddlebags. "Maybe it's these—"

"Get your paws away from there," Sweet snapped, taking a few quick steps toward my brother.

Gustav stood and turned to face him. "Somethin' the matter, Mr. Sweet? You still seem a mite jumpy."

It seemed to be a good thing Sweet's gun was in my hand instead of his. And if looks could kill, as they say, Sweet wouldn't have needed a shooting iron at all. But after staring death at my brother for a few seconds, Sweet relaxed with a shrug and a none-too-powerful smile.

"Aw, you're right. Just look at me. Those braves gave me a permanent case of the jitters. Sorry. Didn't mean to jump ya like that."

Gustav acknowledged the apology with a nod.

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"All the same," Sweet continued, "I'd prefer it if people didn't handle my gear. I'm just . . . well, I'd prefer it. You know."

I did know. When it comes to superstitions, cowboys have got everybody beat but Gypsies and Irishmen. I've never met an Irish Gypsy cowboy, but I bet he wouldn't be able to pull himself out of his bedroll in the morning for all the bad omens he'd see in the wrinkles of his blanket. If this Sweet fellow got spooked when folks touched his saddle, well, that wasn't so strange. I myself get the sweats whenever I see a white dog or a man in yellow trousers. Don't ask me why, for I don't know. Whatever the reason, it reminds me to be tolerant of other men's hoodoos.

"Don't fret about a thing, Joe," I said to Sweet. "You just wait here and I'll rustle you up a fine cow-pony in no time. That all right by you, boss?"

"Sure," Charlie said. "We've jawed long enough. It's time to see whether my new hand can keep his britches on the backside of a horse."

That brought three smiles out to shine on the world. But one of us didn't seem to be in a smiling mood. I'm sure a blue-ribbon deducer like yourself doesn't have to be told who that was.

Sweet made himself useful right quick. Charlie had him ride swing on the left side of the herd, not far behind me, so I got a chance to see if the man was as good as his mustard. He was. He cut in stragglers before they got five steps from the herd. And he did it easy, without getting too spicy about it in that way that can rile a steer up. It wasn't like he was stopping a stampede barefoot and blindfolded, but he was making my job easier, and the jobs of the flank riders and drag riders behind us. So that meant Sweet was hunky-dory as far as that half of the outfit was concerned.

After we had the herd bedded down for the night, Charlie introduced Sweet to the rest of the boys. Everyone huzzahed him for showing up just when we needed the help, japing about how he was "sweet" to ride with us to Dodge.

"Nothin' sweet about it," Sweet joked back. "For one thing, I ain't got a horse." He reached up, removed his hat, and ran his fingers through his hair. "And for another thing, I like my scalp where it is."

"You've kinda grown attached to it, huh?" called out Tornado Monroe, who earned his handle by being the biggest blow-hard on the prairie.

That drew out a few chuckles, but poor Peanuts and Billy were still too fresh in the ground for anyone to laugh much. An awkward silence followed. As so often happened when Tornado met a moment of quiet, he endeavored to put an end to it as quickly as possible.

" 'Joe Sweet.' Hmmmm," he said. "That sounds kinda familiar now I think about it. Any reason I oughta know that name?"

The friendly expression on Sweet's face suddenly pulled up

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lame. "No reason," he said.

"But I do swear I've heard that name somewhere before," Tornado said, not noticing the change in Sweet's disposition. "Where'd you say you was from?"

Sweet suddenly stopped worrying about living up to his name. "Is this fat-mouthed toad accusing me of something?" he snarled.

Every man in camp turned to stone.

"Well, is he?" I'd given Sweet his gun back earlier that day, and he looked mad enough to use it if Tornado so much as blinked.

You never know which way Tornado's going to spin, but this time he chose to go easy.

"I didn't mean nothin'," he said.

Charlie stepped up now, trying out a friendly grin that was meant to calm Sweet down. He put a hand on the man's shoulder. "No need for a fuss. Far as we're concerned, you're—"

Sweet shrugged away Charlie's hand. "Nobody lays hold of me. Me or my gear, either one. You all understand that?"

Nobody said if they did or didn't. They just watched quietly as Sweet grabbed up his saddle and stomped off. When he was far enough away, one of the boys let out a low whistle.

"Feller's sure got a temper on him, don't he?" Greasy Pete said.

There were murmurs of agreement, and though Sweet came over to the fire later that night and tried to make nice, everyone was wary around him after that. We all fell into the habit of watching him out of the corners of our eyes. It was like having your sister marry a rattlesnake. He was one of us now, but we couldn't stop wondering who he was going to sink his teeth into next.

We were a mighty sulky bunch around the fire that night. Only one hand looked anything but glum. And it was the very fellow who usually went slinking off by himself the first chance he got. Gustav was watching Sweet like the man was a fireworks display, looking a little amazed and a little amused. When I asked him why he seemed so perked up for once, all he'd say was, "As Mr. Holmes might say, we've got ourselves a real three-piper here."

Frankly, I couldn't make heads nor tails out of that, and a part of me worried that my brother had finally rounded the bend from "peculiar" to flat-out "loco."

Over the next few days, though, it was Sweet who had us all truly worried. The man's temper flared up every time the outfit gathered together. Somebody was always standing too close to his saddle or asking the wrong question or just remarking that the sky surely was blue in the wrong tone of voice. It got so bad that a few of the boys went to Charlie and asked him to just give Sweet a horse and tell him to clear out. Charlie shook his head.

"We've still got pretty near two weeks on the trail before we reach Dodge," he said. "I need all the hands I can get, even if one

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of 'em is touched in the head."

So all of us had to keep right on tiptoeing around Sweet like he was a hornet's nest under a hat. But the more we bent over backwards not to stir him up, the louder he buzzed.

"What're you lookin' at?" he'd say. Or, "You got somethin' you wanna ask me?" Or, more often than anything else, "One step closer to my gear and I'll shoot your foot off."

As Sweet grew more and more ornery, my brother grew more and more excited, tickled even. Oh, he hid it from everybody else, but I could see it in his eyes every time Sweet fired off his temper. He insisted on being mysterious about it all, though, and eventually I decided to save my stomach the irritation and avoid talking to Sweet and Gustav both.

Sweet had been kicking at us for five days before we finally found the burr under his saddle. We were just finishing up supper when Tornado piped up with, "Don't throw out the whistle berries yet, Pete. We got us some company."

All the boys sat up straight and followed Tornado's gaze out toward the east, and lo and behold there was a rider heading in for camp. We gave him a few friendly yahoos, and he took off his hat and yahooed us right back. A visitor on the trail is usually a welcome thing indeed, for it breaks up the monotony, offers an opportunity to become acquainted with the latest events of the day, and gives a man a chance to trot out all his favorite jokes, stories, and songs—the ones his compadres grew sick of long ago. Since our only other caller in weeks had been less than a rousing success—that caller being Sweet—everyone was looking forward to doing some *real* socializing.

Everyone, that is, except for Sweet himself. There were no yahoos from him, and as the stranger rode up and dismounted, Sweet pierced the man with that cactus-prickle stare of his.

"Hello there, fellers," the stranger said. "Mind if I hitch up my horse and join you?"

"Go right ahead," Charlie said. "Fix yourself up with a plate off the commissary there and come grab some beans."

"Thank you." The man wrapped his reins around a wagon wheel and pulled a plate out of the chuck box. "My name's Les Pryor." He started toward the fire, a friendly smile on his dirt-covered face. "I'm—" The plate slipped through his fingers, and the smile followed it toward the ground.

His gaze was stuck on one man—Joe Sweet.

In the instant it took us to realize something was wrong, Pryor had already filled his hand with a gun. "Nobody move," he said.

Charlie being the trail boss, we all left it to him to ask the obvious question. "What in the hell do you think you're doin'?" he said.

"My job." Pryor reached up and gave his chest a couple of swats. Prairie dust billowed off the front of his shirt, and something

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pinned there took to shining in the firelight. It was a badge.

"George Sweetman," Pryor said, aiming the words straight at Sweet, "you're under arrest."

Sweet muttered a curse that would make a bear blush.

"No use complainin' about it, Sweetman," the lawman said. "It's the rope for you for sure this time."

The rest of us looked back and forth between the two men, so slackjawed we couldn't form words. A dime novel was suddenly playing out right in our midst, and we were filled with awe. True to form, it was Tornado who was able to get his mouth working first.

"We don't know this feller," he said to Pryor. "He just joined up with us a few days ago."

"That's right," Charlie added. "His horse was dead. He said he'd run across a war party. A few of my men lost their scalps about a week back, so we let him ride with us."

Pryor flicked a sceptical look in Charlie's direction. "You the leader of this outfit?"

Charlie nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You got any papers to back that up?"

"I sure do. They're in that saddlebag right over there." Charlie pointed at his saddle. It was sitting just a few paces from the fire.

"All right. Go get 'em. But if there's anything in there other than travelin' papers . . ."

Charlie got up and started moving slowly toward his gear, his hands spread out before him. "Don't worry about that. We'll get this all sorted out right quick."

A few moments later, Pryor was flipping through the papers as best he could one-handed. The other hand still had a gun in it. And it was still pointed in our general direction.

"What's your name?" Pryor asked.

"Charlie Higgebottom."

"Who do you work for?"

"The Lone Star Land and Cattle Company, Incorporated."

"And where are you headed?"

"Montana. The Blackfeet reservation up on the Yellowstone."

Pryor handed the papers back to Charlie, favoring him with a grin. "Well, looks like I owe you gents an apology."

The whole outfit heaved such a big sigh of relief it's a wonder we didn't blow out the fire.

"No need for apologies," Charlie said. "Just tell us what's goin' on here."

"First things first. Would one of you fellers mind holdin' a gun on that coyote over there?"

Seeing as how he meant Sweet, there were plenty of enthusiastic volunteers. Pryor holstered his gun.

"Mind if I borrow me some rope?" he asked Charlie.

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"Now hold on, Sheriff . . . or Deputy or whatever you are," Charlie said. "Sweet there might not be the most easygoin' feller I've run across, but he's part of my outfit now, and I personally don't know that he's committed any crime."

"Oh, he has. Just about every one you could think of," Pryor said. "And his name's 'Sweetman,' not 'Sweet.' George Sweetman."

Sweet finally spoke up for himself then. "My name's Joe Sweet, I swear it. I'm not some outlaw. This feller's crazy."

"Well," Pryor said. But before he could get out another word, a different voice spoke up.

"Look in the man's saddlebags."

We all turned toward Gustav. He was sitting a short hop away from the fire, leaning back against his saddle. His face was serious, but his eyes had a little chuckle in them.

"Sweet's saddlebags. Why don't we see what's in 'em."

Tornado clapped his hands. "That's right! He was always so damned tetchy about them bags. Must be somethin' in 'em!"

There was a little stampede to Sweet's gear, but Tornado ended up at the front of the herd. "Well, lookee here," he said, pulling out a handful of yellow papers.

One of them was a handbill. Tornado held it up for all to see. The word "WANTED" was printed across the top. Underneath was a drawing of a rat-faced man with dark eyes and a bushy moustache.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say this was our pal Joe Sweet," Tornado said. "Except the poster here says his name is George Sweetman."

"Awww, it couldn't be Joe anyhow," one of the other boys added with a grin, "seein' as how this Sweetman's wanted for cattle rustlin', horse thievin', robbery, and murder. Why, our sweet Joe would never get mixed up in such goings-on! Ain't that right, Sweetie?"

A thunderclap of guffaws rolled out across the plains, and the boys began passing the other papers around and reading them aloud. You might have heard that some frontier outlaws are so stuck on themselves they save their "clippings." Well, I can tell you now that it's true. The saddlebag was stuffed with stories torn out of newspapers, each of them recounting the misdeeds of one George Sweetman.

We all knew we'd be talking this one up around many a campfire in the years ahead, so we were making the most of it, giggling and firing off japes and jabs at "Sweetie" as Charlie brought Pryor the rope he'd asked for. The only one who didn't get any digs in was my brother, who was still leaning back against his saddle, watching us caper around like kids.

"I hate to tell you this, Mr. Pryor," Tornado said, "but there ain't a sturdy branch within twenty miles of here."

"No need for a tree," Pryor said. He led Sweetman over to the wagon, sat him down, and proceeded to tie him to the same wheel

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he'd hitched his horse to. Sweetman cursed under his breath the whole time but didn't kick up any real trouble.

"Well, if you ain't gonna stretch his neck, what're you gonna do?" I asked.

"I'm takin' him in," Pryor said. "And you're all gonna help me."

That ended the party straightaway.

"What are you talkin' about?" Charlie asked, though the sudden chill in his voice said he already knew the answer.

"I'm talkin' about deputizing all you fellers. I'm based out of Vinson, and my posse packed it in three days ago. If I'm gonna get him back to town I'm gonna need help."

"Vinson?" Charlie shook his head. "That's south of here, friend. Three or four *days* south. We're headed north."

"I know that. But look . . . we had a whole posse out after Sweetman and his gang a few days back. He was ridin' with five, six other men at the time. I don't know where they got to, but if I try to take him in alone—"

"Oh, don't worry about them, lawman," Sweetman broke in, smiling for the first time since Pryor rode into camp. "They up and left me after your posse put a bullet in my horse. They're probably halfway to Mexico by now. You won't get any trouble out of those boys."

The words seemed right enough, but the smile undercut them somehow. Sweetman looked like a spider trying to coax a fly into a kiss.

"We're cowhands, not gunmen," Charlie said to Pryor. "We've got a herd to look after. That's our job. We can't help you do yours. I'm sorry."

Pryor eyed Charlie scornfully, then looked past him at the rest of the outfit. "There's a reward," he said. "I'll give a share to every man who comes with me."

Tornado held up the handbill with Sweetman's face on it. "It says five hundred dollars here. Divide that up and you ain't got enough for a haircut."

"That poster's a month old," Pryor said. "Sweetman here's caused so much trouble along the Old Western Trail, the Kansas Cattlemen's Association threw in another two thousand last week."

Sweetman grinned, looking pleased that his worth had increased four times. Tornado whistled. The rest of the men mumbled at each other, all of them saying more or less the same thing: "That's a lot of cash."

Charlie could sense that the outfit was pulling away from him. "Now, fellers, think about this. Vinson's gotta be a hundred miles out of our way. We can't just—"

"You say you'll cut up the reward equal—one share for every man?" Tornado asked Pryor.

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Pryor shrugged. "Why not? If I try to collect the whole kit and caboodle myself, I'll just end up with a bullet in my back. But with you boys behind me—"

"Won't be none of my boys behind you, Pryor," Charlie growled, squinting and digging in his heels and straightening up his spine and generally trying to look like the kind of trail boss a man doesn't argue with.

Tornado wasn't spooked. "Oh, shut your trap, Charlie," he said. "I say we help the man."

"We can't."

"Says who?"

"Says *me!*"

"Well, I don't give a damn!"

And the shouting match got going full steam. There was no way Charlie could win, him being outnumbered something like ten to one, but he gave it a good try nonetheless, screaming out insults until his face was red as an Apache's. I noticed in a sort of a back-of-the-mind way that my brother wasn't jumping in on Charlie's behalf, but I was too busy shouting my way into the debate to wonder where he stood on things. Pryor got into the mix of it here and there, too, saying, "You'll have more waitin' for you in Vinson than you will in Billings" and "It'll only be a week out of your way" and "We live in a democracy, fellers. Just put it to a vote and be done with it."

That last one sounded mighty reasonable to most of us. "Everybody stop your yappin' and we'll settle this quick with a show of hands," Tornado called out. "Now then, raise your hand if you think we oughta—"

Just about every man jack of us was about to shoot his paw into the air and send us riding off to Vinson. But before Tornado could finish calling for the vote, a familiar voice piped up again.

"Whoa now! Hold on there!"

Gustav was standing by Pryor's horse, and as we turned to face him, he said something that made me wonder if we needed to have him trussed up next to Sweetman.

"Boys," he said, "I think we need to ask ourselves a very important question: What would Sherlock Holmes do in this situation?"

It had been weeks since I'd read out "The Red-Headed League" for the whole bunch, so it took a few seconds for the words "Sherlock" and "Holmes" to come together in their heads. When it did, the boys either snickered or shook their heads in confusion.

"Who's this Holmes feller?" Pryor asked.

"An Englishman," Charlie said with a sad sigh. "One of them 'detectives.'"

"Well, what's he got to do with us?"

"Plenty, Mr. Pryor," my brother said. "Looked at the right way."

Charlie and Tornado shared a little glance that said they'd

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struck on something they could agree on: It looked like Old Red had left his sanity back along the trail somewhere in North Texas.

Gustav smiled grimly. "I know what you're thinkin'. But just hear me out. If you still wanna take us chargin' off to Vinson after I've had my say, well, I'll forfeit my part of the reward."

I could see lips moving soundlessly in the flickering light of the fire. The boys were doing some quick mathematics. My brother's share wouldn't mean too much when spread around the group, but it must have been enough.

"Go ahead," Tornado said.

Gustav took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and had his say. For a man unaccustomed to speechifying, he did a whiz-bang job of it. His voice quavered once or twice early on, but once he built up a head of steam there was no stopping him.

"Fellers," he began, "you know me. I'm the kinda cow puncher who likes to keep both boots square on the ground or firm in the stirrups. I'm not one for flights of fancy or unnecessary gum-flutterin'. So I'm not just mouthin' off here for my own amusement. If I don't miss my guess, each and every man in this outfit has a bull's-eye on his back, and we better get 'em off lickety-split or there won't be anyone left to do the buryin'.

"Now a month or so back we heard how Mr. Sherlock Holmes cracked up a gang of bandidos over in London, England. He didn't do it with fast guns or quick fists. He did it with sharp eyes. He saw the hidden connections 'twixt this thing and that thing—connections that were there for any man to see if he just tilted his head a bit and found the right angle of lookin'.

"That kinda thinkin' made a powerful impression on me. I have to admit, there was a part of me that was hopin' for a chance to try it out myself. Well, boys, I got my chance and I took it. You can rest assured I wasn't too happy about it, though.

"If you'll recall, it was me 'n' Big Red that went back for Billy and Peanuts after we lost 'em in that stampede. What I saw put me in mind of Mr. Holmes right off. Somethin' didn't sit right, and I did my best to figure out what it was.

"First thing was how the boys were killed. They were each of 'em stabbed in the gut and chest. Now think about that. Where's a man gotta be to poke a feller that way? Why, right in front of him, that's where. But Billy and Peanuts were doin' their rounds. They were mounted. How's a Kiowa or Comanche kill a man on horseback? With an arrow or a bullet or by hoppin' right on the horse with him and stabbin' him in the back or reachin' around and slicin' his throat.

"And then there was where the bodies were left. They were propped up against a bluff, nice and tidy. Now you can't tell me they died that way—sittin' side by side while two somebodies went

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to work on 'em with blades. No, sir. They were killed somewhere else and moved. But why? Well, here's one thing to ponder on: If they'd been left where they died, what would have happened? A few hundred head of cattle would've run over 'em, that's what, and there wouldn't have been so much as a fingernail left for us to find.

"So what are we to think? A gaggle of renegade Indians talked Billy and Peanuts down off their saddles, knifed 'em, scalped 'em, dragged 'em out of the way so their bodies wouldn't get mussed up any further, then made off with . . . how many head did we lose? Just a dozen or so? No. Uh-uh. It just don't figure.

"Of course, I was chewin' on this as we moseyed up the trail. But I was doin' it quiet-like cuz I didn't have enough conclusions sewn together to make half a hankie. And then we ran across Mr. Sweetman there, and suddenly I had me a whole new mouthful to chew on.

"I knew he was nothin' but venom and manure practically the minute he opened his mouth. He said his horse got shot and lamed up so he had to put it down. Well, I took care to get up close to that pinto of his. There were two wounds, all right—one in the head, one in the flank. But it was clear as day which one came first. You get a horse shot in the hindquarters, run it across the prairie, it's gonna be soaked in sweat and blood. But that carcass was dry as desert dirt, and the blood around its head was already baked to a crust. That horse had been dead over two hours before we showed up. The shot we heard—the one into the haunch—that was just to draw us in.

"So we ride up, and this crafty outlaw gets the drop on us. Fine. Makes sense. But then my little brother—who, try as he might, ain't exactly Comanche material when it comes to stealth—is able to sneak up and lay him out with one swat? A swat that's half air? You don't need a hound dog's smeller to know that stinks.

"Then, once Sweetman's back on his feet, he doesn't waste two minutes before he's hissin' like a wildcat cuz I'm strayin' too close to his saddlebags. And when we join up with the rest of the outfit, every other thing out of his mouth is, 'My saddlebags! My saddlebags! Touch 'em and die!'

"Well, it was easy enough to figure out what that really meant. Tell a boy fifty times an hour not to look in the cellar and you know he'll be creepin' down there with a lantern the first time you turn your back. Sweetman was desperate for us to look in those damn bags.

"Only he didn't count on how easily buffaloed you fellers are. I finally lost my patience yesterday mornin' and sneaked me a look when I came in off watch. Sweet made it easy for me by gettin' up to make water when I strolled into camp. Why, he practically handed the saddlebags to me and said, 'Have at it.'

"It seemed mighty curious to me that an outlaw named 'George Sweetman' would come up with an alias as wispy thin as 'Joe Sweet,' then practically wave a wanted poster under the nose of every man

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he met. I figured if I sat back and watched a little while longer, Sweetman's real plan would come into view soon enough. So I kept my trap shut and pretty soon our lawman here arrived, and there the whole thing was, stretchin' out before me like a wide open valley.

"Billy and Peanuts weren't killed by Indians. They were killed by the only folks who could somehow coax 'em off their horses before planting a knife in their gullets—white men. They were scalped and left to find so we'd blame a raidin' party off a reservation. The killers only took a few head of cattle cuz they were gunnin' for bigger game.

"We might've set off after the raidin' party—leavin' the herd sittin' out there on the trail with hardly a hand around to greet whatever rustlers might happen along. Or, with the outfit down a couple men and a band of scalp-hungry braves on the prowl, we might've put in at the nearest town. That would have been Vinson.

"But Charlie, he chose to push on, so we kept headin' north. Then a few days later, Sweetman falls into our laps, and he does everything but hand-deliver a telegram tellin' us he's an outlaw with a bounty on his head. And if we wanted to collect that bounty, where would we go? Again, the nearest town—Vinson.

"But none of us gets the message—or so Sweetman thinks. So a sheriff's deputy just happens across our trail and spots Sweetman right off. Takes him without a fight, too. And where does this lawman want us to go? Where else? Vinson.

"And it's a funny thing about this lawman. Quite a coincidence. His horse's wearin' the Diamond T brand. And that just happens to be the same brand I saw on Sweetman's pinto.

"What am I to make of that? Well, there's only one thing to make. Both those horses were stolen from the same place by the same gang, and this feller callin' himself 'Pryor' is no more a deputy than the beans I ate for dinner. He and Sweetman want us to turn southeast toward Vinson. I suspect they've got a crooked buyer there just waitin' for our herd—and probably a few gunmen sittin' up in the hills, whittlin' the hours away till we get our steers close to town and they can pick us off at their leisure.

"That's how I reckon it all, anyhow. As my brother's reminded me a few times, I ain't no Sherlock Holmes, so I could be seein' things all cross-eyed. But I've been workin' hard to see it straight, the way Mr. Holmes would, and if I've got it wrong . . . well, I invite you boys to tell me another way to figure it that makes half the sense."

Nobody said a word for nearly half a minute. We all just stared at Old Red in a trance of glassy-eyed stupefaction. It was Pryor who broke the spell with a dry chuckle.

"Whoooeee," he said. "I think your friend here must've been ridin' without a hat today. The sun cooked his brain right through, eh, fellers? Now to get back to the business at hand . . ."

Every man in the outfit turned to face him, and those faces didn't

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look thunderstruck any longer. They looked mad.

"Don't tell me you think that crazy little coot's on to somethin'?"

Pryor didn't get an answer in words. He got it in action. Charlie and Tornado stepped up together to grab his arms. He tried for his six-gun, but I got a fist upside his skull before he was halfway to the grip. It was a good, solid punch, too. Pryor sagged in Charlie and Tornado's hands, and when they realized he'd been knocked cold they simply let him plop to the ground like a patty out of a bull's backside. I bent down and unholstered Pryor's gun and handed it to Charlie.

He thanked me with a little nod, then turned to glare at the rest of the boys. "Anyone here still feel like holdin' a vote?" he grumbled.

Everybody stared down at the dirt, suddenly looking mighty ashamed of themselves.

"All right, then." Charlie turned toward my brother, and his grim scowl blossomed into a big grin.

"Well, Old Red, looks like that Sherlock Holmes has got hisself some competition." He gave my brother a shake of the hand so enthusiastic it nearly tore his arm off, and suddenly the rest of the boys were pushing in around them both, slapping my brother on the back and huzzahing his world-class smarts. Gustav withstood it all in bashful silence for a moment before he held up his hands and called for everyone to quiet down.

"Thank you, fellers, thank you. But before y'all go and elect me President, someone needs to get over to the chuck wagon and tie up Sweetman before he can cause any trouble."

I looked past my brother and the men gathered around him. "Ain't he already . . . well, I'll be damned!"

Sweetman was on his feet next to Pryor's horse. He had a rifle halfway out of its saddle scabbard. In a flash he had nearly a dozen guns on him. He let go of the rifle butt and kicked at the dirt.

"How'd you know he wasn't tied up proper?" Charlie asked.

"Who was doin' the tyin'?"

Charlie nodded, understanding right off. "Pryor."

"That's right. I figured he might want his partner free to lend a hand, so I put an eye on the rope he'd wrapped around Sweetman. It was done up with a timber hitch knot, so Sweetman could slip it any time he chose. He had to wait and see if his play was gonna come off, but once Pryor was down he was bound to pull somethin'."

Everyone shook their heads, marveling at how simple all that deducifying seemed once it was talked out. Over the next few weeks, the boys had Gustav go over the whole thing again and again. It got to be torture for Sweetman and Pryor, who had to hear over and over how my brother had tripped them up. Sweetman would get to swearing a blue streak whenever the subject came up, which naturally inspired everyone to reminisce about it all the more.

The two outlaws rode with us as far as Dodge City. We kept both

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of them out in the open, and not a second passed when there wasn't a shotgun stuck in Sweetman's face. If the rest of his gang trailed us, looking for a chance to spring him, we never knew it. Should they have tried, he wouldn't have done them much good as a mastermind, not having a head and all.

When we got to Dodge, it turned out the reward on Sweetman was still good—five hundred of it, anyway. Pryor was just dripping a little honey when he said it was up over two thousand. We picked up some extra dinero, though, since Pryor had a bounty on him, too, only it was under the name "Frank Adams."

The boys took a vote on it and decided to give all the money for Sweetman to Old Red. My brother's too retiring a fellow to argue with such gestures, so he just slipped me a big wad of the cash and told me to treat the outfit to the biggest rave-up Kansas had ever seen. Charlie had consented to give us two whole days to live it up before we hit the trail again, so I used the money to indulge the fellows in every pleasure Dodge City had to offer, which is plenty.

Gustav didn't partake of the fun, though. He used some of his newfound fortune to rent a hotel room and hire a working girl to spend the days there with him. It was all purely gentlemanly, though, I assure you. You see, he managed to dig up a copy of "A Study in Scarlet" somewhere around town and he needed someone to read it to him.

If only that gal had the patience to write for him, too. Gustav tried putting this letter together with her, but she kept interrupting his yarn-spinning with questions. The man can't even read, for Pete's sake, and she's asking *him* how to spell "Sherlock." He finally came and grabbed me out of the Blue Boar Saloon and forced me up here practically with a gun in my ribs. But even though I lost the chance at a few more drinks, a few more hands of poker, and a few more hours of sleep, I'm actually sort of glad it turned out this way. Writing this all down was a mighty big chore, and it helps me feel a little bit of extra ownership in my brother's world-class conundrum-busting. I reckon your pal Dr. Watson probably feels the same way sometimes. You might want to ask him about that.

Well now, looks like I finished up just in time. Charlie's started pounding on the door threatening to set fire to the hotel if we don't saddle up pronto. We've still got a thousand miles of ground to cover before those Blackfeet get their steers. Wish us luck, Mr. Holmes.

Anyway, that's how it all happened, I swear on my dust-covered soul.

Sincerely,

O. A. Amlingmeyer
Dodge City, Kansas
July 2, 1892

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TOTOO

by William Hallstead

Malabar Island Detective Katherine Curtci spread her beach blanket, slipped off her robe, and exposed her bikini-clad, five-foot-ten-inch, sunscreened elegance to the Southwest Florida glare.

Her beeper turned her sigh of contentment into a groan of exasperation. She plunged into her beach tote and yanked out her cell phone.

"That you, Kat?" Sergeant Duckworth rasped.

"Moby, it's Monday, my day off."

"Wouldn't call you, except I figured you'd be on your favorite south-end beach, and we just got a call from over there. Lost dog."

"Lost— Did you say *dog*?" She pictured Duckworth, girth spilling over his belt, chuckling to himself.

"Yeah, lost dog. But it's wearing an owner's tag, same name as a missing person's call that came in earlier this morning. A Beverly Bridger, white female, age twenty, from Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. Dark hair, wearing navy shorts and a white top when last seen. She's down here on vacation with a friend name of Lister. Sandra Lister. She's the one called in the missing report."

"Okay, Mobe. I'll check out the dog, then I'll interview Lister. Where's she staying?"

"The Gulf Sands, just north of where you're at. The dog's on the beach the other way, toward the lighthouse. A snowbird has him."

My punishment for finally getting a break, Kat fumed to herself. She yanked on her hibiscus-patterned robe, stuffed the blanket back in the tote, and plodded southward, barefoot on the

William Hallstead began his fiction-writing career as Franklin W. Dickson; under that name he authored the 31st book in the Hardy Boys series. According to Mr. Hallstead, "There never was a Franklin W. Dickson. That was the pen name assigned to every one of the many writers who turned out books on Frank and Joe Hardy." Under the pseudonym William Beechcroft he has had six more suspense novels published, as well as many short stories. †

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hard sand at water's edge.

The dog, on a leash looped to the arm of a beach chair, was small, black, and sprawled flat in the chair's shadow. The chair's occupant was large, pasty-white—and visibly delighted at the approach of a tall, raven-haired woman in a loosely sashed beach robe. He was still grinning after she officially introduced herself, complete with badge folder.

"M'God, cops are sure pretty in these parts." His eyes roved. "In all parts."

"To business, Mr.—?

"Davidson. Sam Davidson. From Norwalk, Connecticut. Down here to soak up the sun for a week."

"Better take it in short increments, Mr. Davidson. You're already medium rare around the shoulders. Tell me about the dog."

"The missus went shopping and I came out here about half an hour back and found him groggy on the sand. Took him in for some water and cooling off, and called nine-one-one."

"Maybe a vet would have been more—"

"No phone book in the unit."

"Did you put that leash on him?"

"Nope. He came equipped."

She crouched, let the dog sniff her hand, petted his head, and inspected the tags on his plaid collar. Rabies up to date. A Lackawanna County license. And a nametag: *My name is Totoo. My owner is Beverly Bridger.* Plus a phone number with a 570 area code.

The collar and the leash were encrusted with salt.

"You didn't take him into the surf, Mr. Davidson?"

"Hell, no. He was nearly too weak to walk at all. I kept him inside for a while, then brought him back out to wait for you." Davidson craned around in his chair. "Seems a lot better now. Not a bad-looking mutt."

"He's a cairn terrier."

"A what?"

"A cairn. Scottish breed. Smart and determined."

"You're a dog lover?"

"Had a friend who owned one. I'll take him now, sir. Thanks for—"

"Jeez, you had to call me 'sir'? I'm not gray yet."

"Thanks for your help, Sam. And either get yourself some major sunblock or you'd better go inside and watch TV."

She carried the cairn back to her car in a public-access lot a quarter-mile north. Drove the few blocks to the Gulf Sands and led the dog to the motel office.

"Sandra Lister?" the short-cropped henna-rinsed manager repeated as she squinted at Kat's badge then riffled through a box

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of file cards. "Okay, she's in Unit Seven. She do something reprehensible?"

"Lost dog."

"That little guy there? Thought that belonged to the roommate."

"Have you seen the roommate today?"

"Nope. They usually don't show their faces this early."

Kat and swiftly recovering Totoo made it halfway to Unit 7 when its door burst open and a ponytailed blonde in orange halter and shorts flew out and rushed up to her.

"Ohmigod, you've found Totoo! But where's Bev? It's been hours since I called."

"I'm sorry. We're stretched pretty thin in-season. Why don't we go back inside where we can talk?"

She and Bev were coworkers and close friends at a Scranton-based computer service company, Sandra said as, with hands trembling, she handed Kat a mug of instant coffee. They sat side by side on the unit's small sofa. The two girls, both in their adventurous early twenties, had come to the island for a brief carefree vacation, though Sandra felt Bev's dog had been something of a downsider.

"I'm not a dog person, but Bev loves the thing. Even has permission to take him to work."

"He's not a great vacationer?"

"He's okay, I guess, but he's a dog. Has to be taken out, walked, fed. Screws up a lot of potential, but she's devoted to him."

"How did she come up with a name like that?" Kat hoped their chatter would calm Sandra to a degree of reliability.

" 'Totoo'? He's just like that dog Toto in *The Wizard of Oz.* First she called him Toto Two, then that turned into Totoo."

"You reported Bev missing early this morning. When did you last see her?"

"She took Totoo out for a walk around eleven last night. I was worn out, and I went to bed. When I woke up at seven, she wasn't here." Sandra struggled to keep her voice steady. "Her bed hadn't been slept in, and the dog wasn't here, either. This isn't like her at all. I called the cops and, surprise, I didn't get that forty-eight hour waiting thing. A couple of hours, though. But here you are. I really appreciate it."

"Has she been out all night before?"

"Not in the five days we've been here. Hasn't even met anybody to be all night with, if that's what you're asking. I can't imagine where she could be. What makes it worse is him." She nodded at the dog. "She would never . . . just would never . . . "

"Did you two have an argument? Might she have gone back home in some sort of—"

"No! We're like sisters. We've never even had a cross word."

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Abruptly Sandra Lister broke into tears. "Oh God," she gasped, "I just know something . . . something awful has happened."

Kat slipped her arm around Sandra's shoulders. "Why don't you tell me whatever you can that might help. Do you know where she went on her walks?"

"At night, she liked to walk down that street across the road, the one with the boats at the bay end. She liked the view across the bay, the lights over there."

"Do you think that's where she went last night?"

"She always took Totoo there for his last time out. Is that where you found him?"

"Not exactly, but in this general vicinity." She set her mug on the coffee table, stood, and smiled down at the tear-stained roommate. "There's surely a logical reason for this, Sandra. Let's give it a full twenty-four hours. Then, if she doesn't turn up, we'd better apprise her family."

"She has no family. Her mother died when Bev was born. Her father was killed in an industrial accident last year. Totoo—and I, sort of—are her family." She sobbed, gulped. "I'm sorry. I'm a mess. What about the dog?"

"Looks like he's in your care for the moment."

"No, I can't. I just can't. I don't know the first thing about dogs. Don't the police have cages for lost dogs until their owners pick them up?"

"Yes, we do."

"Well?"

Kat glanced down at Totoo, who stared up at her. A lousy cage after whatever he'd been through? The dog would be better off with . . . hell, with her, until Bev Bridger was found.

"I'll see that Totoo is in good hands."

Sandra Lister nodded. "I really appreciate that."

At the door, she touched Kat's arm. "I've got a perfectly awful feeling. Please find her."

Kat patted her hand. "I'm sure there's a logical reason for all this. I'll be in touch." Empty words, she was afraid. If only Totoo could talk.

Not good. A naive young woman on a late-night walk wrapped in tropical vacation euphoria. Half the department's work was responding to calls from stunned visitors: "I left my purse in the car and it's gone." "My beach bag was out of my sight not more than four minutes." But a woman disappearing on an evening walk? Had Beverly Bridger suddenly decided to go home for some reason Sandra was covering up? Not likely without her dog. Or had she met some irresistible hunk out there in the dark and spent the night at his pad? And let Totoo wander off by himself?

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Kat had just one potential lead, if she could even call it a lead. She left Totoo at Island Vets for a checkup. Then she drove to her little mid-island beach house to change into more businesslike gray slacks and white blouse. At eleven-fifteen, she drove back to the island's south end.

Opposite the Gulf Sands, she turned off the main road into Baylook Drive. The street was a short one, flanked by towering Australian pines. Three homes nestled along each side. At the bayside dead-end was a community dock. Beyond the dock and its four tethered boats, the bay glittered in the unrelenting sun.

Halfway down the shaded blacktop, Kat parked. "Door to door," she muttered. And with nothing to sell. Well, maybe a degree of information-eliciting charm.

Forty plodding minutes and five nothing-seen-or-heard houses later, she was running out of hope. The last residence loomed imposingly on pilings, with its ground level neatly boxed in to provide a two-car garage. *The Clymers,* the stylized alligator mailbox announced. Clymers indeed, with towering steps to the main floor.

A white-haired gnome answered the door chime, an ancient fellow in rumpled khakis. He stood barely up to Kat's breastline, which he savored at his piercing eye-level.

"Mr. Clymer?"

"Alban Clymer, at your service, unless you're selling goods or goodness."

She showed him her badge folder. "Detective Curtci, Mr. Clymer. Hoping for a little help."

"Sweetie, I'll be overwhelmed to help you any way an old man can. Bring yourself in and set yourself down. Coffee? Tea? A pinch of pinchbottle?"

"Nothing, thank you. Do you live alone here, Mr. Clymer?"

"Alban, for gosh sakes. And no, the wife is on the mainland getting her hair youthenized. I'm eighty-six, though; you don't have a heck of a lot to fear."

She perched on the edge of an overstuffed chair near the brick fireplace. Why did people move down here to escape snow country, then insist on a fireplace?

"So what can I do for you, darling? Oh my, that's a beautiful head of hair you have. Shines like licorice."

Oh, great. She had skewered come-on artists for less than that. But he was eighty-six, and he was teasing, not demeaning. "Thank you, sir."

"Come on, girl. Between us, it's Alban."

"Were you awake around eleven last night? Alban." Fat chance. She wasn't sure he was completely awake now; possibly a bit aglow from a pinch of the pinchbottle?

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"I'm awake every night at eleven, honeybun. That's when the wife's asleep and HBO starts its skin shows."

Good Lord.

"Might you have noticed anything unusual out in the street? Or anything at all?"

"Anything at all on this street at that time of night would be unusual."

"So you didn't—"

"Don't jump ahead of an old man, dear. I heard a boat."

"Out in the bay?"

"Right out there at the dock. Then it went out in the bay."

"Is that unusual?"

"Yep. Those boat owners are sixty, seventy. Not much given to moonlight cruising."

Worth pursuing? What else did she have? "Any idea who it might have been?"

Alban shrugged. "Heck, I know exactly whose boat it was. Recognized the sound."

She waited.

"Don't you want to know whose boat it was?" he asked.

"Sure, Alban. Whose?"

"John Spencer Kingman's. That's whose."

Was the old coot playing with her? "Alban, John Spencer Kingman is a U.S. Senator."

"You're a very smart babe. That's who owns the boat that makes a peculiar burbly sound. It's an inboard. I'd guess a six-figure inboard. The others are rackety outboards. Last night that boat went out just as *The Bottom's Line* was ending. Those skin flicks are short."

"What time was that?"

"Eleven-thirty, thereabouts. The senator has a place up around the corner. Second one northward. Uses it for a couple weeks when the Senate's out of session. Like now."

"Did you hear the boat come back in?"

"Nope. Past my bedtime by then, honey."

"Well, Alban, you've been a real help," Kat said as she stood.

"I'll bet you say that to all us snitches."

She couldn't help grinning. "I do, but so far, none of them has made a U.S. Senator my next stop."

"The senator say he will see you." The Hispanic maid, in uniform, no less, had left Kat on the front deck of the imposing three-story house. Now she led Kat down a pine-paneled entrance hall, through a two-story-high great room, then out onto the vast screened-in rear deck.

The view of the bay was magnificent. The view of the senator, in

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voluminous white slacks and surely an xxx-large ivory golf shirt, was forbidding. Not because of his imposing size; because of his scowl.

"Better be a damned fine reason for the local police to interrupt my siesta time. I'm down here to get away from interruptions, not to welcome them." He hadn't budged from his huge wicker chair, and he didn't invite her to sit down. From the third-story deck overhead, she heard recorded country nasal enough to compete with Willy Nelson.

"Detective Curtci, Senator, Malabar—"

He waved an impatient hand. "So Esmeralda informed me. What business can you possibly have here?"

"I'm investigating the disappearance of an island visitor, Senator. A woman named Beverly Bridger."

"Never heard of her."

"She went for a walk last night around eleven, probably down Baylook Drive. A resident at the bay end of the drive states that your boat left the dock around eleven-thirty."

"I know absolutely nothing about any boat leaving the Baylook dock last night, Detective. And I do not understand why you think a departing boat concerns me."

"It was your boat, Senator."

"You say you have a witness?"

"Yes." If not an eyewitness, at least an ear-witness.

Senator Kingman glared at her. Then he looked at the ceiling and bellowed, *"Gary, get your butt down here!"*

The music overhead cut off in mid twang. She heard footsteps thumping down stairs, more than one person. An athletically trim youth in khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt thudded onto the deck from the great room. He was followed by a less trim boy in jeans and a rumpled tan golf shirt.

"My son, Gary, Detective, and his buddy, Edward Herkiser. Penn State seniors celebrating spring break. Gentlemen, this local detective lady claims our cabin cruiser went out late last night. Might you know anything about that?"

Silence. Herkiser glanced at Gary. And Gary shrugged. "Yeah, Dad. We took it out for a short spin around the bay. Came back maybe an hour later."

"There you are, Detective . . . Kersey, is it?"

"Curtci, Senator."

"Whatever. Mystery solved."

"No, the mystery is what happened to Beverly Bridger." She turned to the two collegians. "Did either of you see a young woman out there on Baylook Drive last night?"

"No," Gary Kingman said. "Not a soul, did we, Herk?"

"Not a soul," echoed young Herkiser.

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"Not when you left in the boat, not when you came back?"

"Nobody," Gary said.

Herkiser echoed him again.

"Satisfied?" Senator Kingman rumbled.

Gary and his sycophantic friend stood there blank-faced. No, not quite. What was that twitch playing at the corners of Gary's mouth? A feeling of superiority as he watched his powerhouse father handle an upstart woman cop? Or was something more going on here?

"Senator," she said, "may I have your permission to check out your boat?"

"No, you may not, Detective. I'm tired of this ridiculous fishing expedition of yours. If you have no further questions, I believe I hear Esmeralda sounding the luncheon chime."

"Gentlemen," she said to Gary and his pal, "you will not leave the island until you are cleared by me, you understand?"

"GOOD DAY, DETECTIVE!" Senator Kingman thundered, finally hoisting himself out of his chair. "Leave!"

Thus bounced from the senator's vacation retreat and fuming at his high-handed attitude, Kat drove to Island Vets to pick up Totoo.

"He's still a touch shaky," young but balding Doc Harter told her, "but with a little TLC, he'll be fine."

"The man who found him told me the dog was completely exhausted, dehydrated. Could a night on the beach have done that to him?"

"If he was in the surf. He'd been completely immersed in sea water. Salt residue all over him. Gave him a bath. Now he's a real pretty little cairn. Smart one, too. Found the biscuit bin a second after I put him on the floor."

"He's cleared to go?"

"Oh, sure. Just give him that TLC I mentioned, and he'll be fine."

Totoo wasn't going to get much tender loving care in a police retention cage. "Looks like you and I are going to spend the night together," she told him.

At the Island Mart, she picked up a bag of dog food and a box of biscuits. Totoo zeroed in on the biscuits while they were still in the bag. No appetite problem with this guy.

Tuesday morning, she couldn't bring herself to leave the little cairn alone all day. She took him with her when she reported in. She was relieved when Moby welcomed the company.

Totoo curled up in a corner of the squad room. "Take him out a couple times, will you, Mobe? I'll leave you a biscuit supply."

"You going back for another senatorial filibuster? Know what I

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think? I think the girl fell off that dock at the end of the street, drowned, and the tide took her on out."

"Possible, I guess, but why would her dog walk across the island and end up exhausted on the gulf shore crusted with sea salt?"

"Huh. Keep digging."

"While I'm doing that, how about having our resident computer ace check out those two midnight boatmen for possible rap sheets."

She called the Coast Guard. No bodies found anywhere in the area for the past month. If Bridger had sunk, though, she wouldn't come back up for a couple more days.

Kat drove across the three-mile causeway to its pair of toll booths on the mainland end. The two attendants now on duty hadn't been there Sunday night, but they told her neither of the Sunday night shift attendants had mentioned seeing anything at all suspicious in any departing vehicle.

She returned to Malabar Island. Interviewed the occupants of several houses in the vicinity where the dog had been found. Nobody had seen anything.

"Not much of a ratchet forward, Mobe," she lamented as the descending sun splashed the squad room with hot orange. "I'm dead certain those two college hotshots know more than a shrug's worth. I'd like to take a look at that boat, but with what I've got so far, the chances of a search warrant are nil. Especially with the senator backing up Gary's and his buddy's story."

"What did you expect a father to do, Kat? He's not about to—Hey, Totoo, suppertime's coming up. Hang in there, will you?" Moby swiveled back to Kat. "Never saw such a dog. Sits and just stares at you until you give him the biscuit."

He shuffled through the papers on his desk. "Computer came up with this much. Herkiser's clean, but young Kingman's had his jollies. A slew of speeding and reckless-driving raps, fines paid but no convictions. High-spirited kid stuff, except for a charge of assault in an Altoona, PA, tavern. No conviction on that, either."

"A pattern, though. An unruly son protected by a prominent father."

"Seems so, Kat. Looks like you're up against the proverbial stone wall. Or maybe those two didn't have anything to do with the girl's disappearance, after all. Maybe she just bugged out."

"Sure, Mobe. And left her dog? Get real."

"Get real yourself, Detective. In two days you've got nothing at all."

"I've got a boat leaving."

"Boats leave all the time, Kat."

"And, as a long shot, I've got Edward Herkiser. He might be the key, but not while he's with Gary."

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"So get him in here. Hasn't the senator told you to stay away from his house?"

"Good point, Mobe. Very good point."

Day three, and she was still nowhere. Now, though, she had a plan. Came to her last night as she played stare-a-biscuit with Totoo.

"Kingman residence," said Esmeralda in a monotone phone voice.

"I would like to speak with Gary, please. This is Katherine."

Apparently that was the kind of call Gary was used to getting. He came on the line in seconds.

"Hey, Katherine? Do I know you?"

"We've met, Gary. This is Detective Curtci. There are just a few points I need clarified." She ignored his snort of disillusion and pressed on. "It would be a help if you and your friend would come to the station today. Say, in an hour or so."

"I don't think—"

"I really don't want to bring you in on material-witness warrants, Gary."

"We're not under arrest or anything like that?"

Interesting question. "No, no. Just an informal chat." Said the spider to this formidably-backed fly.

"I'll see." Off-balance for sure. Would he run to papa, a worried son with something to hide? Or swagger in here like the arrogant clod his rap sheet appeared to spell out?

Or perhaps the senator had deduced she wasn't going to let this drop until she interviewed them without him present.

A few minutes before noon, the two of them pulled into the PD parking, an arrival timed, perhaps, for lunch hour to cut her short. Wouldn't work. She never ate lunch. The car was a lustrous forest-green Jag, no doubt the senator's vacation buggy.

She took on Gary first, leaving Herkiser in the drab little waiting area. The interrogation room was also barren of decor; just a center table and two hard chairs.

"No one-way mirror?" Gary quipped.

"You've been in these before?"

"I've seen them in movies."

"We're not that fancy here."

Gary plunked into one of the chairs. Kat sat across from him. For a long moment, she said nothing. The calculated silence seemed not to bother him at all.

"Let's go over what you told me Monday, Gary."

"Sure. We took the boat out around eleven-thirty or so. Cruised the bay nowhere in particular. Came back an hour later. We saw

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nobody when we left or when we came back. That's all there was to it."

"You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

That went on a few more minutes, but she hadn't expected to hear anything else. Her target wasn't Gary Kingman. It was Edward Herkiser.

"All right," she finally sighed. "You can go back to the waiting area while I talk with your friend."

He grinned. "Okay, Katherine. Want me to send him in?"

"I'll come for him in a few minutes." She needed those minutes. She stepped out to Moby's desk. "I'll take Totoo now, Mobe." With the cairn on his leash, Kat beckoned to Herkiser. He followed her into the interrogation room.

"You going to interview the dog, too?" he asked as he sat where she told him. "What's he doing here?"

"Visiting. Relax," she advised Herkiser as she took her chair, the leash still in her hand.

"Is this going to take long?"

"Up to you, Herk. Is that what they call you?"

"That's what Gary calls me."

"I'll call you Edward. Time to tell me the truth, Edward. What really happened out there on Baylook Drive?"

"How many times do you want to hear this? Around eleven-thirty, we took the boat out. Came back an hour later. We didn't see anybody when we left or when we came back in. That's it."

Almost word-for-word identical to Gary's statement. Rehearsed? Or was she at a dead end here? Maybe they truly hadn't seen Beverly Bridger and her dog. Even if they had, were they to stick to their story, there was no hint of another lead. It all came down to this moment with this close-mouthed boy.

She let the leash drop.

Then she leaned forward, her eyes hard on his. "Did you perhaps *hear* anything unusual that night, Edward?"

He seemed not to hear her. Totoo had wandered from under the table and stopped beside Herkiser's chair. Edward's attention had swung to the dog. Motionless on his haunches, the cairn stared upward, unblinking.

"I'll ask you again, Edward. Did you hear or see anything unusual out there that night?"

"Uh, anything what?"

"Unusual."

"Huh-uh." He was trying to ignore the dog's unremitting gaze. Totoo's attention riveted on Herkiser. Who twitched uncomfortably. On his forehead sweat glistened.

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"She was a twenty-year-old girl, Edward. About your age. Just out for a walk with her dog. With that dog, Edward."

He swallowed. Blinked. Wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Dammit," he whispered. To the dog. "It was an accident."

"It was what, Edward?"

"An *accident,"* he wailed. And like a pent-up flood behind a ruptured levee, the story poured forth.

"In a way, it *was* an accident," she told Moby after the arrests, the senator's predictable explosion, the hastily summoned lawyers. "They ran into Beverly out there and talked her into a moonlight boat ride. Just a chance encounter. God knows why lonely women fall for invitations from strangers, but she and Totoo went aboard. Kingman and Herkiser had two six-packs with them. When they left the bay and cruised into the gulf, the six-packs were in them. That, plus his cocky arrogance, prompted Kingman to make a pass at Beverly in the cabin. It escalated into serious grappling. According to both of them, her head smacked the cabin wall hard enough to kill her."

"Manslaughter and attempted rape."

"That's what they realized, too, Mobe. It got uglier, if that's possible. They tied her body to one of the boat's two anchors and into the gulf she went. About five miles offshore, Herkiser estimates."

"But the dog—"

"Herkiser says Gary made him throw Totoo overboard, expecting him to drown. But that's one tough little canine. He obviously swam toward lights on shore—five miles of doggy-paddling with those stumpy little legs. Some dog, that one."

"Damn near human, too. You say he's the one who cracked the case—with his hard, beady stare?"

"It was more than Herkiser could take, an accusing stare from a little dog he'd tried to kill. Totoo's a great interrogator. Come on, Totoo, let's go home."

"He's yours now?"

"Beverly had no family, Mobe. Her friend doesn't want him. So it looks like I've got a partner."

Moby chuckled. "In your case report you gonna give your partner a mention for an assist?"

"Not a bad idea." What she wouldn't mention, though, was the dog biscuit she had taped under the arm of Herkiser's chair just before his interrogation. ●

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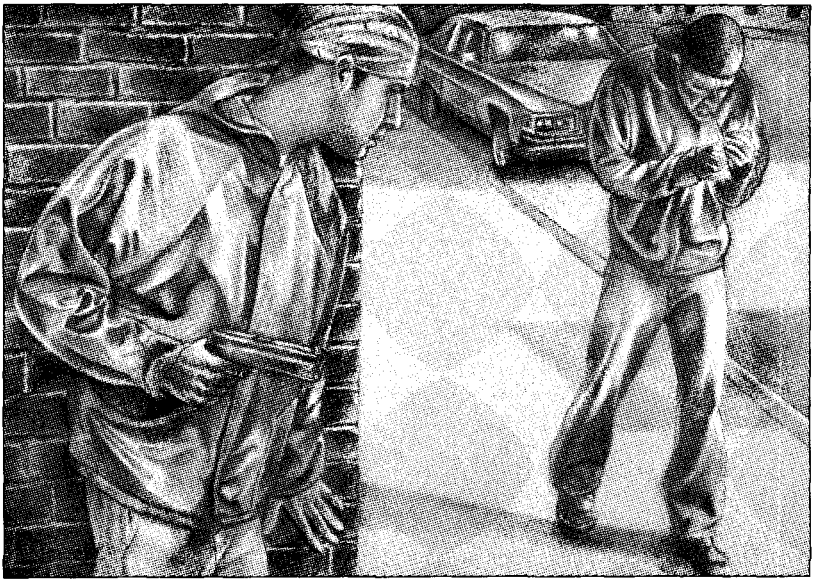

Art by Daniel Galanaugh

A Piece of the City

by Andrew Vachss

1.

Just because you live someplace, that doesn't mean you understand how it works. The city where I came up is a perfect example. Everybody who lives there talks like they know all about it, but they never will. If you want to figure out how the city really works, you have to get far away from it. When you're down too deep in it, all you can see is your own little piece.

I know what I'm saying. I've been away for a long time now. There isn't much to do here, once you figure out how to stay alive. So I've been studying the city, getting ready for when I come back.

What I finally figured out was that there isn't just the one city, like people think. I mean, everybody knows there's different parts of the city, like Queens and Brooklyn. And there's parts inside the parts, like Harlem and Greenwich Village. But the city is cut up a lot smaller than even that.

2.

When I was a kid, the city was split up into little tiny pieces, all the way right down to the blocks. Our territory was three streets,

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plus a vacant lot, where they had torn down some buildings. Anytime you left your territory, no matter where you went, you were an outsider.

Mostly, we got around by subway. You might think, nobody owns the subway, but you would be wrong. The subway, it's just like the city itself. It's a great big huge thing; but the minute you put people into it, it starts getting cut up into pieces.

Like, if you got on a subway car, and it was full of boys from another club, it was *their* car. And if you had enough boys get on with you, you could maybe make it *your* car.

In October of 2002, Knopf published *Only Child*, the latest in the series of Burke novels by Andrew Vachss. The author, who has been called "a contemporary master" by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, has also recently penned a nonseries thriller that will be released as a Vintage Crime/Black Lizard Original in February, 2003. Entitled *The Getaway Man*, the novel pays tribute to the origins of the hardboiled genre. ¶

Other people riding the subway, they would watch this happen right in front of them, and not pay it any mind. When I was a kid, I thought that was because they didn't understand what they were seeing. Now I know different. They knew. But to them, the subway was like a bad neighborhood they had to go through every day to get to work. They would never want to live in a neighborhood like that, so they never wanted a piece of it for themselves, that's all.

But the block, that wasn't like the subway. The block was permanent. You were there every day. When outsiders came into your block, you had to make them pay tolls. Because if people could go through your territory without paying, it was like it wasn't yours at all.

The City—that's the government, not the territory—it owns the subway, so everyone who rides has to pay. But if you were riding with some of your boys, and a kid got on alone, *you* could collect, too. Charge a toll, because that was *your* piece he was standing on, then.

It was the same on our block. We didn't own the buildings—nobody around there did. Even the men who came to collect the rents, they lived somewhere else. The City owned the streets, just like it owned the subway. But the City wasn't around all the time, and we were.

3.

It was that rule, about paying the tolls, that got me sent away. The vacant lot was between two territories, ours and the Renegades'. We both used it, for different stuff, but neither of us claimed it. If a

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coolie—a kid who wasn't with a club, or what they would call an off-brand today—went through the lot, any club that was there could take the tolls from him.

We had little clashes with the Renegades about the lot, but it was mostly just selling wolf tickets, loudmouthing around. Both clubs knew: that vacant lot, it didn't move, but it was just like the subway. The only time you had a piece of it was when you were right there to hold it.

The leader of the Renegades was a skinny little guy called Junta. All of the Renegades had those PR names, but PRs, they don't always look like each other. Some of them were so black, if they didn't speak that Spanish, you would think they were colored. And some of them were as white as us, with everything in-between. The only way you could tell for sure was from listening to them talk—even the ones that talked English, they didn't talk white.

I didn't know how Junta got to be leader. He wasn't a great fist-fighter, he didn't have any kind of rep with a knife, and no one ever saw him with a pistol. I didn't see where he was any great brains, either.

The reason I knew about Junta is that I had to meet with him a few times, one-on-one. I was president of the Royal Vikings, and sometimes we would have a sit-down to settle a dispute. If the presidents couldn't settle things, then the warlords would get together, to set the rules for a clash. But it never came to that between the Renegades and us.

Junta and me, we made a treaty, to have our clubs share the vacant lot. The way Junta explained it, the lot was kind of like the gateway to our two territories. If we fought each other over it, we'd *always* be having that same fight, over and over. We needed to protect the gateway from outsiders; that was most important. Better to share a little piece than not to have any at all, he said, and he was right. So our treaty was, whoever was on the set, for right then, it was their piece.

4.

It started when one of the Mystic Dragons got himself a girlfriend in our territory. He would walk right through our block, flying his colors, and nobody was crazy enough to make him pay tolls. The Mystic Dragons, they were a *major* club. People said they could put a thousand men into a meet, and a couple of hundred of them would have guns. Real guns, not zips.

The way guys in gangs talk, a lot of that was probably just blowing smoke, but there was enough truth in it to keep us all chilled. Our club, the Royal Vikings, we could put, maybe, twenty guys out for a meet . . . and some of them would only make it because they would be scared not to. If a club like ours ever vamped on a Mystic

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Dragon, we'd be finished.

What kicked it off was the day Bunchie came charging down the steps to the basement we used for a clubhouse.

"Mystic Dragons!" he yelled.

"What?!" Tony Boy said.

"Mystic Dragons! All over the block. They got a car at both ends. And one parked right across from here!"

Everybody was getting all excited, talking at once. "Cool it," I told them. "If this was a raid, they would have been down here already."

"The president is right," Little Augie backed me up. But I could see he was nervous.

I looked around the basement. Just five men, plus me. I thought about sending Sammy out to see what the Mystic Dragons wanted—it wouldn't look good for the president to go himself. But if they saw the guy we sent was our warlord, they could get the wrong idea.

I could send Little Augie, but he's not a good talker. And bringing the Mystic Dragons down to that ratty basement would be showing them too much.

I had to think. Everyone went quiet, waiting on me. All we had in the clubhouse was Sammy's zip, and some bats and chains. I knew at least a couple of the boys always had knives, but Bunchie had said there were three carloads of Mystic Dragons.

"I'll handle it," I told the others. "I'll go see what they want. No reason to let them see what we're holding down here."

"You want we should go with?" Little Augie asked me.

"Yeah," I said. "But stay back. Right against the building, understand? Don't crowd nobody."

I was proud of my boys. They looked sharp and hard, in their white silk jackets with *Royal Vikings* across the back. Our jackets are all custom-made, by this very classy place down in Little Italy. They cost a lot, but they *say* a lot about us, too, so they're worth it. Two of the boys stepped out first, then moved off to the side to let me through, while the others filled in behind.

The Mystic Dragons' car was a big black Buick. A four-door. Facing the wrong direction on our one-way street, so the driver was against the curb. As I walked over, the back door opened, and three men got out. They didn't say anything. The driver looked at me out of his window.

"You Hawk?" he asked.

"Right," I said. That's the name I go by. It was written in purple script on the left side of my jacket. On my right sleeve, there were four little hearts; meaning, I'm the president. Sammy, our warlord, had three on his. We didn't spell out the offices, the way some clubs do.

"The man wants to talk to you," the driver said.

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"Here I am," I told him, cool.

"Boss," he said, as he climbed out of the car, holding the door open.

I couldn't tell if he meant, "Boss!" it was good I was willing to talk, or that I would be talking to *his* boss, but I got in. It was classy, the way they set it up. I didn't have an excuse to refuse, because I would be the one behind the wheel, so they couldn't take off with me as a prisoner. Besides, all their men were already standing on the sidewalk. Except for the ones in the cars at the end of the block.

The guy in the passenger seat was colored. I expected that, him being a Mystic Dragon and all. But I was surprised at how old he was.

"I'm Baron James," he said. "You know my name?"

"I heard it," I said. Which was the truth. Everybody in the city who ran with a club had heard of Baron James. He killed two men in a clash a long time ago, when he was real little. Baron James was famous. His name was in the *Daily News,* with headlines and everything. The paper said it was wrong that they couldn't send him to the state pen, just because he was only fourteen at the time. People wrote letters to the paper, saying, for what Baron James did, they should give him the electric chair, no matter how old he was.

"You're leader of . . . what's the name of your club?"

"The Royal Vikings," I told him, like I didn't know he was saying that just to say we were nothing.

"Yeah. Well, then you're the man I have to talk to. About what happened to Chango."

"Who's Chango?"

"All you need to know about Chango is two things, man. One, Chango is a Mystic Dragon. And two, some of your boys jumped him two nights ago, in the vacant lot over by Twenty-ninth."

"Not my boys."

"Yeah, your boys. Chango's got himself a little twist around here. She's a PR, but she lives over in your turf."

"I don't know any names," I said. "But we know a guy who flies Mystic Dragon colors has a girl around here. He comes and goes. Whenever he wants. Nobody ever bothers him."

"That's the way it's supposed to be," Baron James said. "Only, it wasn't. Chango, he's going to make it. But he got hurt pretty bad."

"Shot?"

"Stomped," Baron James said. "Wasn't no fair one, either. No challenge, nothing. He said he was just cutting through the lot when he got piled on."

"It wasn't any of my—"

"You Vikings, you going to pull something like that, you should've left those jackets at home," he said. He reached over and

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rubbed the back of his fingers against where my name was. "Nice," he said.

"Look," I said, being reasonable. "You know a club like ours, we'd never start anything with—"

"Oh, I don't think it was your *club,*" he said. "We thought it was your club, there wouldn't *be* no Royal Vikings, now. No, what we figure is, it was a couple of *members* of your club. See the difference?"

"No," I said. I took out my pack of smokes, held it out toward Baron James—I wanted him to see my hand wasn't shaking. I was a little surprised when he took one. I lit us both up from my lighter.

Baron James took a deep drag. Then he said, "Difference is, a club makes a move, it has to be approved, am I right? The president has to give his okay."

"Unless it's—"

"This wasn't no self-defense," he said. "Don't even try to run that."

"I wasn't saying—"

"And, if it's *not* approved, that means the boys went freelance. Now, if that was one of the Mystic Dragons, anybody who would try a breakaway move like that, he'd be disciplined, understand?"

"Yeah."

"And that's all we're asking for," he said. "A little discipline."

"But none of our—"

"Only thing is," he said, talking right over me, "we'd kind of like to do the discipline ourselves. I mean, you do whatever *you* think needs to be done. But, when that's over, we get our turn. Fair enough?"

"If one of the Vikings did anything like that, I would—"

"Not one," Baron James said. "At least two. Probably three, but we'll settle for two."

"Who are you saying jumped your man?"

"I just *told* you," he said.

"You said Vikings," I said. I knew if I backed off, even a little, we were all done. "I asked you which ones?"

"How would Chango know your boys?"

"Well, you said—"

"I said Vikings. I didn't say which ones. That's for you to find out. And deal with."

"There's no way any of—"

"This here is Wednesday," Baron James said. His voice was soft, but it was ice cold. "We give you until Sunday night. Now, your boys, they seen us talking for a while now. Seen us talking like men. No screaming and yelling. Calm and cool, am I right? So when you go on back, what you tell them is, the Mystic Dragons thinking about making you Vikings an affiliate club. You know what that is?"

"Yeah. But I thought you guys only took—"

"Times are changing," Baron James said. "This color thing, it put a lot of good men in the ground. And a lot more in the peniten-

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tiary. There ain't no money in it. The Mystic Dragons, we got plans. There's all kinds of rackets going on in the city, and we're going to take our place, soon enough. This is a big city, and we entitled to our piece of it.

"Now, the only way we make the right people listen is behind numbers. Big numbers. What we got to do is consolidate," he said, like he loved the word. "We can't be fighting each other all the time; what we get out of that? So, that's what you tell your boys."

"But you're not really . . ."

"What I just tell you, that's the stone truth," Baron James said. "Everybody be doing this, you see soon enough. Even the China-boys, way downtown, they stepping past color when it come to business. Us, too. We reaching out to the little clubs . . . no offense . . . to bring them in. You don't get to *be* Mystic Dragons, but you get to be *with* us, you understand?"

"I think I do."

"But you know the rules," he said. "And the toll you got to pay. You got to give us the boys who stomped Chango."

I didn't say anything. I knew more was coming.

"Sunday night," Baron James said, "we pull up to the curb, just like now. We get out, just like now. You walk over to us, just like now. Only, Sunday night, you have two men with you. The ones we want." Baron James looked at me. His eyes were green—I never saw that on a colored before. "Everybody gets in the car," he said. "The car takes off. Later, when you come back, you president of an official Mystic Dragons affiliate."

Baron James leaned in, close to me. "Only, when you come back. you come back alone."

5.

We started that same night. First, I put out the word—all the Royal Vikings had to come in, emergency. Then I questioned every single one of the boys.

Little Augie and Bunchie helped me. Sammy, too. I knew it couldn't have been any of those three, because they had all been with me the night Chango got stomped.

Everybody denied doing it. I expected that. What I didn't expect was that I couldn't tell which one was lying, the way I usually can.

Even in our own little piece of the city, you didn't see Royal Vikings out by themselves too often. We had our clubhouse, the candy store, the corner; that was about it. The school had dances at night, sometimes, but that was too far out of our territory for anyone to go alone. And, if you *did* go alone, it would take a lot of heart to fly colors. Sammy might do it, or Little Augie, but not the rest, I didn't think.

And Baron James had said it was at least two men.

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The clubhouse had a back room. We used it for initiations, and for when we got the debs to come down. That night, we used it for the interrogations.

We all suspected these particular two boys might be guilty. They were real tight with each other, partners, and we figured they might be plotting to move up in the organization. But even after Sammy hurt one of them pretty bad, they wouldn't admit anything.

By Friday night, I knew I wouldn't have anyone I could give to Baron James.

6.

I got my men together, and I told them how it had to be. I talked for a long time before I was finished.

"What happens to us?" Little Augie asked. He was talking to me, but I knew he was speaking for the whole club.

"The Mystic Dragons don't know any of our real names," I said. "Not even mine. Just 'Hawk.' The first thing, the jackets have to go. I mean, *burn* them. The Royal Vikings are done. Once this is over, the only one the Mystic Dragons are going to be looking for is me."

"You sure you want to—?" Sammy said.

"What choice is there?" I told them. "I'm not going to play Judas on guys who didn't do anything. If we want to keep our little piece, here, we'd have to go to war against the Mystic Dragons. That's crazy; we'd all be wiped out in a day. I'm the president; I know what I have to do. I got people in Chicago. Soon as it's done, that's where I'll go."

"The hell with that," Little Augie said. "Just go. Tonight."

Little Augie was a good man. I was sorry to lie to him about having people in Chicago. But the whole club was there when I was talking, and I wasn't sure of them all. I knew the Mystic Dragons would be around right after I took off, asking questions, and I couldn't take a chance that one of them wouldn't turn rat, if they got scared enough.

"No," I said. "The way I have to do it is the only way. They're going to get me anyway. I might as well have a name."

"Where are you going to get a real pistol?" Bunchie said. "Nobody around here has one to sell."

"The same place we get our jackets," I said. "The guy who makes them up for us, I heard, if you bring the right money, he can get you anything. Now, everybody, put up your coin. Tomorrow, I'm going shopping."

7.

I didn't blink when the old man in the shop told me it would be three hundred dollars for the pistol and the bullets. I told him I'd leave the money with him, come back in a couple of hours. He

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looked at me for a minute, then he said, "That's not how it's done. You want the piece, you wait right here for it. Understand?"

I said I did. Right then is when I started to understand a lot of things. Like why people call a pistol a "piece."

The old man picked up the phone and said something in Italian. I didn't speak it, but I figured what it was about.

When he hung up, he looked at me. "You're getting bigger," he said. "All the time."

"I'm almost eighteen," I told him.

"I mean your . . . ambitions," the old man said.

"Oh. Like what I just—?"

"Sure, that. A business expense. And I see you've been recruiting, too. Outside the tribe. Very smart. All over the city, you can see, that's the trend among . . . businessmen."

I think I knew it right then, but I gave myself a minute to make sure I was under control. Then I asked the old man, "What do you mean, outside the tribe?"

"The last bunch who came in here for your jackets, that was a surprise," he said. "I never saw Spanish boys in your . . . organization before."

8.

Right after that, I straightened things out with Baron James. We agreed on the tolls. I paid them, and the Mystic Dragons never moved on the Royal Vikings.

The pistol the old man sold me worked perfect. The only way I could use it was by calling for a one-on-one, so the cops found out pretty quick it was me who aced Junta.

I thought maybe the Renegades wouldn't testify against me . . . you're not supposed to. But they did. By the time the court was through with me, I was doing the book. That's what they call a life sentence . . . from throwing the book at you, I guess.

When I got to prison, I came in with a name. Not just from what I did—there were plenty of guys who had a body up there. But I was the first white guy inside who had friends in the Mystic Dragons, just like Baron James promised. It made me kind of a leader in there, even that young.

I see the parole board again in another year. Maybe they'll cut me loose this time. I've got a perfect institutional record—I know how to do time.

I'm only forty-two years old now. It's not too late for me to get my little piece of the city. ●

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The Voice of the Turtle

by Neil Schofield

Victor was sitting in the dark, getting drunk. Sitting on one of the leather sofas in the reception area, drinking from a bottle of scotch, and thinking, I don't have a murderer's voice, that's the problem, but how can that be? I have every kind of voice. I am the voice of them all. I am Victor the Voice. I must have a murderer's voice somewhere in me. He was passing through the maudlin stage now, sitting on the leather sofa in the pitch dark and knowing that if he didn't move now, get up and leave and go to his car, he'd be here all night. And that had happened more than once.

A finalist for the 2001 *EQMM* Readers Award, Neil Schofield produced several top-notch stories for us in 2002. His lead tale for 2003 takes a look at a little-known part of the theatrical world in which the actor is simply a voice. "In my time, I've worked with many 'voices,'" he explains, "all of whom were extremely hard-working and talented artists. But in this, as in any profession, often there is someone like [this story's] Victor lurking around the fringes. He is *not* typical." ✝

And then very quickly, as often happened, maudlin was gone and he reached the angry stage. A rage took hold of him, boiling but icy in its intensity. He was going to kill Harry Phoenix. He was going to wait for Harry, wait for him in the alley outside the studio doors, and leap on him when he came down. Batter his head against the pavement, kick his teeth out with the heel of his shoes. He was making little jerking movements now, playing out the savage scene. But no. Harry Phoenix, he remembered now, was one of those aikido freaks. Victor was much older than the little sod and he'd lost a lot of weight recently. Harry would have Victor's tripes out and on the pavement in no seconds flat. But there had to be something. He'd find a way. For all that he was, and all

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that he was going to do, Harry Phoenix deserved to die. Especially after he had killed Victor stone-dead. Just now. Up there.

The woman was trying to scramble away up the bed, away from the axe that was clearly visible in the foreground of the shot. She was trembling, the bed was trembling, the axe was trembling, everything was, because the image had been frozen on the monitor in front of Victor. The next frames, Victor knew, because he had seen this a dozen times, would be a cutaway shot of the axe being raised high in the air, a tight shot of the woman's terrified screaming face, and then, what an original idea, another cutaway to the wall above the bed on which spatters of blood were landing.

Victor was desperately trying to keep his eyes on the monitor. That wasn't really difficult, because suddenly he was identifying strongly with the terrible actress on the bed. A trapdoor had suddenly opened up in his stomach, his ears were singing, and he had a sense of vertigo exactly as if he were looking into eternity. His eyes were fixed on the image because he didn't dare look to his left towards the soundproof window between where *he* was, in the voice-over booth, and where *they* were, in the control room. And his ears were burning. Because through the headset, the talk-back which Tony had carelessly left open was relaying to him the things Harry Phoenix was saying to Beattie and the things she was saying back to him. Harry and Beattie were sitting at the long production desk, and Tony, the engineer, was diplomatically fiddling with the controls on the mini-disc machine with his back turned to them, pretending not to listen, ha-ha, a sound engineer who didn't listen, pull the other one.

So Victor watched the frozen woman on the bed. Lit by the reading lights on his table, his face was reflected in the monitor, nicely superimposed on the woman's frozen image. Symbolic, he thought distractedly. Because the conversation he was listening to, and that was bringing curiously ice-cold beads of sweat bursting out on his forehead, was your real, honest-to-God axe-job.

Small, bearded, in fact small-bearded, Harry Phoenix, the producer from hell, owner and proprietor of Phoenix International Productions, was speaking to Beattie. And get that *International.* A tin-pot production company that had sprung up like mold, as they do every other day in this business, existed for what, six months, and it was already *International.* My arse. And the titular head of this mega-enterprise was saying, "You're going to bugger this up, Beattie, if you go on with this old has-been, and I'm not going to let you bugger it up. This is a one-hour special for Channel Four, let me remind you. I've been selling this for a year. If it gets the ratings, and it will, there are another twelve lined up. Jake's come up with some of the best footage I've ever seen, any-

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one's ever seen, for God's sake, and now you're going to naus it all up by laying a voice track that they wouldn't risk on *Playground."*

Playground. The comment was even more biting for Victor, since he had been one of the first voices, one of the very first, on *Playground.* He had been the voice of Gerry the Gerbil, that hideous green felt monstrosity, for seven years. Thousands upon thousands of ankle-biters had glued themselves to their tellies three times a week to watch and listen to the rib-tickling Gerry the Gerbil. Seven years of that, he'd done. In the end, he'd turned it in. No, be honest, they'd given Gerry the deep six, why, he didn't know. All right, he did know. But a couple of times late for the voice-laying sessions didn't merit junking an entire character, did it? A couple of times, all right, most of the time in the last year of Gerry's life.

Hang on, Beattie was saying something. "I know Victor's had problems, Harry, but he really is doing a good job on this. I *truly* think you're exaggerating a bit."

Oh, nice one, Beattie, thanks for your support.

Harry said, "Exaggerating. Am I, am I just? Well, *truly* have a good listen to what you've laid so far, darling. All right, once upon a time, maybe, he was the dog's bollocks, but look, kid, this series, or what will be a series if you can get this right, is called *Through a Killer's Eyes* not *John and Jane at the Seaside.* I could find better than Victor in any third-rate repertory company in Widnes. Tony, go to the top, would you, heart, and let's hear it wild."

Tony punched a couple of buttons on his computer because that's all you had to do these days with digital technology, none of this winding back, none of those brown shoelaces they used in the old days, and then the takes Victor had already recorded began to roll through the headphones.

Victor began marking the script in front of him with meaningless hieroglyphics, *very* carefully because he didn't want the slightest sound to go back through the talk-back and let Beattie and Harry know he was listening. He had to hear this. He took out his large silk pocket handkerchief and wiped his forehead. The handkerchief gave him something to do, but it had actually become suddenly a little stuffy in here. Normally the voice-over booth was cool, air-conditioned, but today, for some reason, the air conditioning had developed a vibration inaudible to human ears, but which Tony the engineer had insisted was going to turn up in the background of the voice track. He'd tried to prove it to Victor and to Beattie, the director of this epic. Neither of them could hear it, but Tony said it was there, and in here, Tony was the boss. He had ears like a bat.

Victor's mind was wandering off again. That was another problem that had afflicted him recently. Remarked on by more than one producer. Not unkindly, but even so. He thought: *I knew a man who could hear the cry of bats./How do you know he*

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could?/Because he told me so. Or something. *The Cocktail Party.* Three weeks of repertory with the Eliot play, and what was the other? Chekhov. *Ivanov,* that was it. How long ago was that? Twenty years? Time flies, dear, when you're having fun, that was what they had always said to each other, sitting in the dingy dining rooms of grim, grimy, theatrical digs in Warrington, and Worksop, and yes, Harry, thank you, Widnes. Of course, they could be brave and gay because this was something they were only doing pro tem, until the call came, until the night the Big Agent happened to be out front or a teleseries came along or the West End Part or the Film Part or Something. Something was going to come along, wasn't it? Well, no, sadly it wasn't, actually, for most of them, and most of them knew it. And so, to quell the desperation, it had to be made to be Fun.

But if you did it long enough, it became not quite so much Fun, and finally it stopped being Fun at all.

Victor had often shivered at the thought of the future that could have been his if he had not been in the right place at the right time. He had been thirty-two, a dangerous age for an actor, just on the cusp, when you know it's going to be all right, or it's not. In Salford it was *Death of a Salesman,* playing one of the Loman sons, he couldn't now remember which one. A good, meaty part, but you can mess it up. But he hadn't messed it up, and out front there was, not the legendary Big Agent, but just as good, a television producer who had seen in Victor exactly what he needed for the new character he was introducing into his twice-weekly soap. He'd told Victor quite frankly, he wasn't engaging him for his looks, because let's be honest, Victor, you've got character, but you're no matinée idol. But Victor had a good Voice.

And there you were, the legendary Big Leap, from three-weekly rep to the Big Time, network television, and instant fame. Hardly instant, be honest; it takes a bit of time for a character to encrust itself on the half-empty minds of the hopeless drabs who watch *Pluckett's Alley,* a heartwarming, twice-weekly (daytime), slice-of-life chronicle of life up there in black-pudding and whippet country.

But it had happened eventually, a measure of fame had started to come along; there were winsome little articles in *Woman's Own* and *TV Times,* there was a modest amount of fan mail, and, most important, there was an agent. Frank Porteous was that dreamed-of thing, a West End agent. All right, be honest, he was on the eastern marches of the West End, West Kensington if not, indeed, Hammersmith, but he did the business, did Frank. The first thing he had done was to persuade Victor to come and live in London, and to commute to Manchester. All right, be honest, that wasn't too difficult, though it did piss Victor off a bit having to get up at five twice a week to get the first train up to the studios.

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He had to drag his mind back quickly from Manchester, because they had finished playing the takes over there in the fish tank.

"See what I mean?" Harry's voice was high. He was pulling fretfully at that silly little non-beard. "Where's your drama? Where's your edge-of-the-seat? What you've got there, Beattie, is your cosy. We don't want cosy."

Beattie said, "You're not being fair, Harry. Victor's one of the best voices in the business. All right, *was* one of the best voices. But he's still got it. He's still a voice. He's known, and he's respected and liked."

"Not by me, Beattie, he isn't. What he's got is a whisky and Benson and Hedges voice. Has he, by any chance, had a drink tonight? Because there was a fluff in there, wasn't there—on the word *slaughter?* Perhaps *I'm* losing my touch, or is it you? And, I mean, Beattie, just look at him, will you. Has he slept in that suit or what?"

Victor avoided looking down at his suit. Yes, it did perhaps need a bit of a press, a thorough cleaning, in fact, but it *was* Gieves and Hawkes just the same, bought back then, when his star was bright. But never mind that, the horror was continuing in there, piped to him red-hot through the cans.

"Beattie, this is docudrama, this is a high-quality, minutely-researched, factually-dramatised examination (*And just how*, Victor thought irrelevantly, *can you have a factually-dramatised anything, pray?)* of the psyche of a particularly brutal maniacal murderer. I don't want the voice that launched a thousand potato chips to be saying, what's the line you've got there (rustling of paper), *'For three endless seconds, Gladys Morgan looks eternity in the face.'* Crap line, by the way, but we can get away with it if the voice is right. And the voice isn't right. All I hear is (he did a horribly accurate imitation of Victor), 'And when your serial killer comes home, Mum, what does he want to find on the table for his tea? That's right, Crispy Codburgers.' "

Beattie breathed out loudly. Victor, without looking, could tell that she was glancing at him, immobile, waiting in his little cell. She said, "Play us that section again, Tony, will you?" Victor could hear a tone in her voice that said she was fighting a losing battle but was at least trying to claw back a little authority.

And Tony had said, "Sure."

Victor, sitting half-drunk now in the half-dark, hot with the remembered embarrassment, was trying to claw back a little of the rage he had felt at that moment. He didn't want to lose it, he had to hang on to it, because now it was all he had. Up there, Harry Phoenix had, unknowingly, all right, but all the same, flayed him alive. Every single nerve ending in his body was now

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open to the air and hurting atrociously. Harry had killed him. To be thrown off a job, that was death. When this got out, and it would get out, believe it, he would be dead. He might as well open his veins right here on the sofa and save everyone the time.

He took another swig from the now nearly empty bottle. Of course, *that* was it. He had a bottle. Wait for Harry outside, hit him with the bottle. No, those Aikido nuts had lots of cute ways of dealing with bottle-wielders, especially half-drunk bottle-wielders, even in the dark.

But he was in Soho, for God's sake. There must be a dozen pubs within a hundred yards where he could buy a gun. All he had to do was walk into a pub and—and do what, exactly? "Double scotch, please. Oh, and a .357 Magnum, if you have one." What did he know about buying guns? He just didn't have the contacts. He groaned. There must be *something,* some way. Wait a minute. Didn't Harry have a kid who went to school in Hammersmith somewhere? Perhaps that was it. Yes, kidnap the kid, you could work it out, collect him one afternoon, your father asked me to pick you up, no, no, no, that was no good, either, he was losing his mind.

He slumped back on the leather sofa. And just what was wrong with Crispy Codburgers anyway? That campaign had added a full seven points to the client's share of the market. Codburgers. Strange. It was on this very sofa, in exactly this position, that his first big chance had come.

He had been waiting here for what was her name, that dizzy blond creature that he'd met in Manchester, a presenter on one of those dizzy daytime magazine programmes. She'd come down to London to do a voice-over, pantyhose, *something,* and he'd met up with her, taken two days off which they spent in his penthouse flat in the Barbican, hardly leaving the bedroom, hardly leaving the bed, for that matter. Two of the most exhausting days of his life, he remembered.

And he'd been here on this sofa, waiting for her to finish her session and come to lunch, when the door from the stairs up to the studio level was thrown open and Adrian Ryland came in, or rather *boiled* in. Adrian Ryland was a very fat and very *in* director of television commercials whom Victor had briefly met in Frank's office. *Met* was putting it a bit strong, perhaps. Frank had tried to introduce Victor as one of his up-and-coming stars, but Adrian had been in a hurry to leave, always was in a hurry to leave, and had said, "Send me a demo. I'll be in touch." They'd sent him a demo tape and he hadn't been in touch and that was that.

But now Adrian Ryland was boiling into the reception area, red in the face and clearly livid. Like a lot of his breed, he was taking it out on the receptionist, a feisty temp who didn't know what was

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going on, but she did know that it wasn't her fault that his bloody voice artist hadn't turned up, nor was it her fault that his bloody commercial was slotted for tonight on Thames, and she told him so.

Adrian Ryland wheeled around in desperation and his eye fell on Victor. He stopped wheeling. His eyes narrowed in an attempt to dig out Victor's name from some internal filing system, and then he came across.

"Vernon," he said.

"Victor, actually," said Victor.

"Victor," said Adrian Ryland without missing a beat, "you're one of Frank's, aren't you? Come with me. You've got a strapline to do for me, and if you mess it up, you'll never work again, got it?"

A strapline turned out to be the last telling line at the end of a TV commercial which summed the whole product concept up. And this had been for, for what the hell was it, oh yes, a female deodorant called *Trust*™, for God's sake. Just where *did* they dig up those names? And where did they dig up the people who dug them up?

"*All it takes is*—Trust." That was the line. And they had done seventeen takes in the tiny Soho studio before that tiny, infinitesimal pause before the word "Trust" was absolutely right, and the intonation on the word itself was perfect. The pause and the intonation, of course, were implying all sorts of things, because the images on the screen were of a man and a woman obviously on the point of Doing It, and the word *Trust* had to come just at the point where She looked up at Him with a sickeningly Audrey Hepburn under-the-eyebrows look and an equally stomach-churning little smile. But at the end it was perfect.

Adrian had stood up, put on his camouflage jacket, and said, "All it takes is a sick-bag. Thanks, everybody, that'll do me. Victor, very nice. Very nice, indeed. Be in touch."

And, wonder of wonders, so he had. And after that, so had they all been in touch. All because of those five words. Victor had never seen the dizzy presenter from Manchester again, although he had seen and experienced plenty like her since.

From *Trust*™ Victor had gone to Frutigums, from Frutigums to Swish (kitchen cleaner), from Swish to Smist (air freshener) to Grobbles (God knows) to the famous Crispy Codburgers, and thence through a hundred, a thousand products whose names looked as if they were cheating moves on a Scrabble board or small towns in Serbia.

Victor became a Voice. One of the Few, the happy Few. He was up there with the Allens, the Jarvises, the Tates, and the Barkworths. You saw them chasing from Soho studio to Soho studio, with a shoulder bag full of scripts, one after the other, sit down in the voice booth, lay the script out, do a voice check, do a couple of dry runs to get the tone right to the director's satisfaction (or more

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likely that of the client, the Frozen Pea man or the Toothpaste man or the Grobbles man, sitting on the sofa behind the director out of the light), and then Bob's your uncle, one take and it's done. On to the next.

Voice was a small community. In London, there were really, if you were honest, only a couple of dozen. The ones who got the work day after day, who could walk into a studio on five minutes' notice, take a piece of mawkish drivel and in one take, all right, say two, give it the crushing authority of a pronouncement by St. Paul.

Mind you, let's remember that the audience for this stuff consisted of people who thought that the First Letter to the Ephesians would probably run: "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Ephesian, Thanks very much for the socks you sent me. Remember me to the Galatians when you see them next. Love, St. Paul."

It was all probably a load of bollocks, whatever the marketing people trumpeted. But even so, there was a certain satisfaction in taking some copy so saccharine that if you listened to it twice you were diagnosed diabetic, written by some wet-behind-the-ears Media Studies graduate, and making it sound just like English. Not, perhaps, as much satisfaction as your real acting, but the money was just great.

For eight years, he'd done both, commuting twice a week to do the acting, record the soap, and the rest of the time he was running around town, doing four, five, six, seven scripts a day. Television commercials, radio commercials, documentaries, spotty audiovisual work for spotty conference producers, even dubbing the occasional foreign film, although that was something like work.

One hilariously hectic day, he did eleven sessions, and if you'd asked him to name just one of the products he'd worked on, he wouldn't have been able to tell you. They'd all run into one.

Eventually he gave up the Soap of the North, or it gave him up. They got a bit fed up of him turning up at the last minute before recording with, at best, a sketchy idea of his lines. So they wrote him out in a spectacular multi-car pileup, some thousands of teary Northern mums wrote teary letters to the producer, there were jokey little items in the TV columns, and that was that. He was free. Free to concentrate on the Voice.

And he'd done a lot of work along the way: what his drama teachers would call, in that weird phrase, "honing your craft," which had always sounded to Victor like some grave, seamanlike ritual performed by pipe-sucking Torbay fishermen when it was simply *too* rainy to go out in their little boats.

So he had all the standard accents, and he had his character voices. Gerry the bloody Gerbil, for example. Later on, he'd pulled an occasional booking on a late-night radio satire show. And when he gave up the Northern soap, the producer brought him in as a

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permanent. He did a very good impression of the Prime Minister, a reasonable Margaret Thatcher (contradiction in terms), and the writers had latched onto his gay archbishop character straightaway and wrote him a one-minute sketch every week.

He was Victor the Voice and the microphone loved him.

But Harry Phoenix didn't love him; Harry Phoenix hated him. And he hated Harry Phoenix. Lying back on the sofa which had been the cradle of Success, and which was now the coffin of Failure, he wondered fuzzily just how he could get back at Harry. The trouble was, Harry was armoured. Harry was more than Harry. Harry was a symbol. He was the flag bearer for a whole new generation of smart, cunning, get-rich-quick bastards who were the media equivalent of a futures trading-floor. Face it, he told himself, Harry's too much for you. They all are. Victor the Voice is no match for Harry Phoenix, the Highflier. The Flame-Bird.

The slick, streetwise producer was stronger than the ex-Victor, ex-Voice. And now, there was more to worry about, here in the black night of the reception area. Because at the glass doors, there had appeared a huge insect, black and iridescent, which was staring through the doors with its one enormous glistening black eye. I'm worse than I thought, Victor said to himself. Now it's the DTs. The End. He let his head roll back against the leather cushions and sighed a long sigh. The end of Victor the Voice. Harry had been right, up there in the studio, when he was finishing Victor off with the ice-cold efficiency of a professional hit man.

Harry Phoenix had said, "And don't give me that Victor the Voice crap, Beattie, because it doesn't wash anymore. He *was* Victor the Voice, now he's just another broken-down voice man who does everything the same. Everybody's heard everything he can do, we've all heard it all, and I want something different. This is a true-life—well, *drawn* from true life—story about shocking, bloody murder, for crying out loud. Jake and Wally gave it a narrative treatment, with a voice-over, because we don't want to risk being over-sensational. (*God forbid,* thought Victor, *that you should ever be thought that.*) But the voice has to have fear and murder in it. I want to hear bloody slaughter coming through every syllable. And Victor can't hack it. If you want to give him something, let him do the radio announcer's voice, or read the tabloid headlines, if you like. There are lots of little bits in there. If you love him so much, let him do the sound bites."

Beattie said, "I'm sure Victor can come up with the right tone of voice if we ask him. And anyway, this is not really the time to be having this conversation, Harry. With respect. We've got half the voice in the can and now you come in and tell me you don't like it."

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Harry's voice was full of razor blades. "With respect, Beattie, the only reason we're having this conversation now is because I wasn't told you were playing housemother to washed-up old voice merchants. Why I wasn't told we can talk about some other time. But the fact is that we are having the conversation now, and I'm telling you the voice isn't right."

Beattie tried to speak, but Harry wasn't having it. "Beattie, this is my baby. I've spent a good bit of my life bringing it up and you're not going to kill it now. You're not going to kill my baby. We're late already on this thing. Transmission's two bloody weeks away. The commissioning editor loves the rough cut, but we're late. The lab's biking everything round tonight, because I thought, I *thought,* you'd be ready to do a final sound mix. And you're not. I tell you, Beattie, I've got a lot hanging on this. You let me down, and I'm dead. But then, if I am, love, so are you."

Victor was barely conscious of this. He was trying to keep his red-hot ears from flashing like hazard lights.

Sound bites? Is that what Harry had actually said? Let him do some *sound bites?* He felt a wash of rage sweep over him. Who was this little arsehole anyway? A jumped-up little nothing who'd squeezed his way into the networks with a series of two-for-a-penny pop videos, had managed to sell this half-baked series idea to some half-witted commissioning editor, and now he thought he was Jack Warner or somebody.

Bastard. Frank had been right.

"A bit of scarcity, Victor," Frank had cautioned. "Don't do everything. You know what they're like. They're fickle bastards. You're flavour-of-the-month one minute and then suddenly you can't get arrested."

He wondered when it had started to happen, his not being able to get arrested. Two, three years ago? Or perhaps it was during the recession. When advertising spending was the first thing to go, and suddenly the Swish people and the Grobbles people found that not advertising didn't make any difference. Perhaps that was when the never-ending gush of work had slowed down and, almost overnight, become a trickle. The worst was that the trickle was work of a kind he would never have touched when he was Victor the Voice. Two-line radio commercials for regional stations, some industrial-training-film work. A talking book, for God's sake.

He'd given up the flat in the Barbican and moved to Fulham, telling himself that it was the smart move. Retrench and reform. He'd sold the car. Who needed a car in the city anyway?

But the deeper problem was, when you were running around town from studio to studio, you needed something to give you a bit of a bump start in the morning, and then several somethings throughout the day, between sessions, to keep you going. Because

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after fifteen years of it, it was all so bloody boring. Mindless, even. So, he'd got into the habit of having a large scotch as a heart-starter before his first session, usually in the Intrepid Fox in Dean Street, and then several more as the day went on. And you can't go on like that for long before it's noticed.

"Easy on the sauce, Victor," Frank Porteous had said several times. "I had a comment the other day. Nothing naughty, but you ought to watch it."

Easy for Frank Porteous to say sitting in an office counting his twelve-and-a-half percents. He wondered how Frank was. He hadn't seen him for years. Having an agent was one of the things that had given *him* up.

Evidently, Frank had been right, because the ratio of time in the voice sessions to time in the pub began to tilt in the pub's favour. Come on, fair dos, he thought, we all like a drink occasionally.

At that moment, sitting there listening to his career, *his life,* being dissected, the thought of a drink reminded him that there was the bottle of scotch in the bag at his feet under the table in the voice booth, and he'd give anything to be able to reach down and take a belt. Just to liven him up or calm him down. Or something. Perhaps he could make some excuse and go to the men's room?

No, wait a minute, Beattie had turned to him. At last. They were going to talk to him directly. Tony flicked the talk-back switch, glanced at it again, and then looked at Victor oddly. He knows, thought Victor. He knows I was listening. Well, sod him.

Beattie said brightly, *too* brightly, "Victor, love, we've got a bit of a problem with the script. Harry's not entirely happy with some aspects. So I'm going to wrap it for tonight, if that's all right by you. We'd almost done the two hours anyway"—she glanced at the clock which now stood at five to twelve, midnight—"so we wouldn't get much more done. Okay, love? And I'll be in touch for the next booking."

I'll bet. Victor thrust the script into his bag and stood up creakily. He went through the double-door air lock into the control room. Beattie smiled at him, and Harry nodded in a friendly way, the hypocritical little bastard.

"All right, Victor?" he said. "Plenty of work coming in?"

"Oh, you know, keeping the wolf from the door," said Victor.

"That's the way," said Harry. Victor wanted to go across and say to him, *"Why don't you either shave or grow a proper beard, you horrible little sod?"* But he didn't.

As he was leaving , Harry and Beattie had already turned back to each other. Now it begins, he thought, the real battle. This was going to go on for a long time. But Beattie would lose. Beattie would always lose against Harry, because Harry gave out the

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work. And so, he had trudged down the darkened stairs to reception, with the only encouraging thing the bottle in his bag.

And that was where he still was, trying to work out the perfect, foolproof way of killing Harry Phoenix, getting absolutely nowhere and facing a future as black as the night outside the glass doors. Now, to cap everything, outside those glass doors there was this giant insect, peering in with its feet cupped around the great single eye. He sat up. No there wasn't. What there was, was a motorcycle courier outside in a black crash helmet and black leathers.

The Creature stamped its feet and pressed the buzzer on the autoporter as though it was something he'd done too many times already.

Victor stepped across unsteadily, in the dark, to the receptionist's desk. He looked at the entryphone with its single light blinking at him.

Without even thinking, he picked it up, and said, in his best receptionist's voice, right out of the Essex borders, fluty but with a snap in it, "Ye-es?"

"Chrissake, how long am I supposed to keep standing out here? Got some stuff for a Beastie someone."

Beattie, Victor thought. Then he thought again.

Then he trilled, "Just leave it on the doorstep, heart. Someone'll be out in a tick."

"Need a signature."

"No you don't. Sign it yourself. You've done it before. Just put Beattie Ransom. We're all a bit tied up at the mo, heart. Do us a favour."

The insect shrugged its shoulders and hauled out several large film cans from its panniers, placed them on the doorstep, and, with a 750cc roar, was gone.

Victor crossed to the door, pressed the button to open the electric lock, and went outside. He gave a quick look up and down the street. No one. He let the door close quietly, put his bag on top of the film cans, picked up the whole lot, and walked unsteadily to his car, where he threw everything into the backseat. Then he went home, wondering, as he drove to Fulham, what exactly he had.

At the flat, he soon found out.

After that he sat in his sparsely furnished lounge for a long, long time with a large glass of scotch in his hand, looking out over the darkness of Fulham, listening to the faint traffic sounds become fainter as the town went home. Finally, with a heave, he got up and pulled down from the cluttered shelves the portable cassette recorder he had used for rehearsing his lines, once upon a time, when he was Victor the Voice and not just a washed-up old voice merchant.

He put in a brand-new cassette and sat at his desk with the recorder in front of him. Right. Let's see. He pressed REC and said,

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"This is—" He pressed PAUSE and thought for a moment. Yes, why not? It kind of summed the whole thing up, didn't it? Harry wouldn't get it, ignorant little bastard, but then what the hell. He rewound and began recording again: "This is The Turtle with a message for Harry Phoenix. We've got something that belongs to you. We've got the A and B rolls. We've got the music and effects tracks. We've got the work print and we've got every single foot of negative. If you want *Through a Killer's Eyes* to go out, you'll get fifty thousand ready in small bills. If not, it'll all go up in smoke. We'll be in touch. Be ready, or your baby dies. And so do you."

The thing was that the voice was one he had never used, couldn't even remember developing. He didn't know where he dragged it up from. It was a horrible voice, was the voice of The Turtle. It was low, rasping, and guttural, churning up from somewhere deep, deep in his throat, but with a weird sort of chilly nasal whistle running under and through it. He wasn't sure how he was doing that, but it was dreadful to listen to. There was murder in there, and sheer, stark evil. It sounded, even to him, like the breath of Hell. God knows what it would sound like to Harry Phoenix.

Victor listened to it once. And a second time. Then he sat back and smiled. Well now, there's a Voice for you, Mr. Phoenix, and pick the bones out of that.

He thought he'd let it stew for thirty-six hours. So when the cassette finally arrived through the post, Harry would be good and ready. In the meantime, he would have to work out a foolproof way to collect. But, given the situation, that shouldn't be too difficult.

Sound bites. Wasn't that what Harry had said? *Give the sodden old has-been some sound bites, if you like.*

Victor leaned back, sipped some more scotch, smiled some more, and thought about that.

Sound bites.

Yes, he thought. Yes, it does, doesn't it? ●

Victimless Crime

by Stephen D. Rogers

A domestic is cozy;
Hardboiled is noir;
Locked-room is a puzzle
Where logic is star.
The methods are many
When plotting the crime
Of stealing from readers
A block of their time.

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THE FARAWAY QUILTERS

by Edward D. Hoch

Simon Ark, a dabbler in the occult who claims to be two thousand years old, is a more aloof sort of sleuth than most of Edward D. Hoch's other series characters, but he allows the author occasionally to treat offbeat subjects and plots. Ark was the protagonist of the first published Hoch short story. Given his claims to longevity, it isn't surprising that he hasn't changed much over the nearly fifty years since that first case. ¶

Ever since I'd known Simon Ark he'd been searching for the devil. More often than not he found death instead. On the evening he visited my home in Westchester, I hardly expected him to find either one. I certainly never thought I'd see him confronting a robed and cowled Death, complete with a bloody scythe, in my family room.

But I'd better begin with my wife Shelly, because in a way she was the cause of it all. I was a very young journalist when we met in a small Western town over forty years ago. I met Simon Ark at the same time, and they were to become the two most important people in my life. Shelly and I were married six months after we met. I took a New York job in publishing and rose to become editor-in-chief of Neptune Books. Soon we had a modest home in Westchester County. We had no family, and Shelly filled her days with community activities. Occasionally she'd even write poetry, publishing it in obscure literary quarterlies under her maiden name of Shelly Constance.

My frequent journeys with Simon Ark, which seemed to increase following my retirement, had been a source of constant irritation to Shelly. She viewed this tall black-garbed man whose appearance seemed never to change as some sort of freak best to be avoided. It was one night in spring, following my return after a lengthy stay in England with Simon, that Shelly and I had a real battle.

"He claims to be two thousand years old. Isn't it time he was dead?"

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"For God's sake, Shelly! He's our oldest friend!"

"In more ways than one."

I sighed and threw down the newspaper I'd been reading. "What do you want me to do? Never see him again?"

We didn't speak for the next couple of hours, but that didn't last. In all our years of marriage we'd never gone to bed angry. As I turned out the light Shelly asked, "What would you think if I invited Simon to speak to the Quilters?"

"The Quilters?"

It took just a moment for the name to register. The Quilters was a group of a dozen ladies, all of them over fifty, who met once a month for some purpose I'd never quite been able to grasp. Shelly had joined them under the impression they were some sort of poetry society, but she'd confided to me almost at once that they seemed more interested in what was known in the publishing trade as New Age topics—mysticism, astrology, spiritualism, and alternative medicine. I'd never thought of the group in connection with Simon Ark, but perhaps my wife had a point.

I rolled over in the bed and snapped the light back on. "Can you picture Simon helping to make a quilt?"

"Silly! They haven't done anything like that since I've been going. They bring in speakers on New Age topics and discuss things like crop circles and interplanetary visitors."

I tried to make light of it. "So that's what you do on your nights out!"

"It's a nice diversion once a month when you're halfway around the world with Simon Ark. I don't have to believe any of it."

"Do you really think they'd be interested in listening to Simon? He can be a dull speaker at times."

"I'm glad you finally admitted it!"

"Really, Shelly—"

"I'm trying to be nice! I'm trying to make amends for all the bad things I've said about him. Look, the next meeting is at our house in two weeks and we're having a woman speak to us on death and dying. Simon would be the perfect balance because he claims to be living forever!"

"I don't know that he's ever put it exactly like that."

"Ask him! Ask him if he'd be interested in giving a twenty-minute talk to the Quilters. Tell him one of our members is a retired movie star. That might intrigue him."

Shelly had mentioned Grace Merrit before. Back in the forties when I was just beginning to discover the wonders of a motion picture on a Saturday afternoon, she'd played various exotic types, usually in World War II spy films with Alan Ladd or Ray Milland. Like so many other young actresses, she dropped out of films after a decade or so, when the parts became scarcer. I saw her on televi-

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sion once or twice in the fifties and then nothing. Shelly seemed to think her departure from Hollywood wasn't just the result of ageing but also of some vague scandal. In any event, she'd married the publisher of a string of weekly newspapers up the Hudson. They were divorced now but she was living comfortably, enjoying life in her advanced years.

"I can't imagine Simon being interested in an ageing glamour girl," I told her, "but I'll mention it."

"Grace has been very active in our little group. In fact, she's the one who gave it the name the Quilters."

"I wonder where she came up with that."

Simon Ark was lecturing on Indonesian mysticism as part of a seminar on the Far East being held at Columbia University. I met him afterwards and we had a drink at a nearby bar. "How'd it go?" I asked.

"My friend, it always goes well for me. The audience is another matter. You said on the telephone you wished to offer me another speaking assignment. I trust it is not to a university audience."

"No, hardly that. Shelly belongs to a little group of older women called the Quilters. She's wondering if you'd like to give a brief talk to them at their next meeting."

"I know nothing about quilting," he said with a weak smile.

"That's just a name they chose. It has more to do with New Age topics. The other speaker will talk on death and dying. Shelly thought you could make a nice balance."

"I'm beginning to think your wife doesn't like me," he said with a sigh. "This is really not my—"

"She said to tell you an old movie star would be there, an actress named Grace Merrit. She's one of the Quilters."

There was the slightest flicker of his eyelids at the mention of her name. "The Faraway Quilters," he said softly, almost to himself. "Of course!"

"Then you'll come?"

"Certainly. What did you say the date was?"

I think Shelly was as surprised as I was that Simon had accepted her invitation to speak to the Quilters. "He seemed interested in Grace Merrit," I told her. "That's what decided him."

The Quilters meetings were always held on the second Thursday of the month, when I usually managed to be away. This time I had to remain and greet Simon, who surprised us by arriving a full thirty minutes early. "I am sorry to come so soon," he told Shelly with unaccustomed grace. "I took an early train from New York so I wouldn't be late."

"That's perfectly all right." She showed him the family room

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where extra chairs had been brought in. "There'll be eleven of us tonight. Kate Brady's husband will probably come, too, because she doesn't like to drive after dark. Usually he just drops her off and comes back later to pick her up, but if he sees other men around he may stay in the kitchen to chat."

Simon Ark nodded. "And Grace Merrit?"

"You'll find she's quite nice, not at all the movie queen type. She usually comes with Mona Emberry. I think she had some small movie parts, too."

In fact, they were the first to arrive, about ten minutes early. Mona was a large, take-charge woman, slightly masculine, who came in still clutching her key ring. "You must be Simon Ark," she said, standing almost as tall as he did. "I read your witchcraft book."

"There are very few of you around," he said with some modesty. Almost at once he turned to her companion, a shorter woman, a bit plump but with a lovely face that seemed ageless. I figured she had to be at least eighty yet she moved like a much younger woman. "You must be Grace Merrit."

A glowing smile lit her face. "That's right."

"It's been a long time since I saw you in films," he told her. "I followed your career with some interest."

I could not have imagined those words issuing from Simon Ark's mouth. Much as I wanted to hear the remainder of their conversation, I was summoned away by the door chimes. Wayne and Kate Brady had arrived. "Well," he said, seeing me. "So long as I'm not the only man I guess I'll stay awhile." Wayne was a real estate executive, and was still going off to work every day even though he was old enough to retire. His wife Kate had problems with her night vision, but otherwise she seemed in perfect health.

Simon had arrived at seven-thirty and forty-five minutes later all eleven women were crowded into our family room. I shut the kitchen door and opened a couple of beers for Wayne and me. "Wasn't there supposed to be another speaker?" he asked. "Someone about death?"

"I guess she's not here yet."

We listened to Shelly introduce Simon Ark as a well-known writer and student of the occult, her voice carrying clearly through the kitchen door. When Simon himself spoke, his voice did not carry as well. Finally, annoyed at my own curiosity, I opened the door a crack so we could overhear his words.

". . . and it is not death we fear," he was telling them, "but the act of dying, often accompanied by pain and suffering. But I am here to talk to you about life, some form of eternal life, perhaps. I leave it to the next speaker to enlighten you about death. Before I continue, are there any questions thus far?"

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Someone had raised her hand, and I peeked into the family room to see that it was Grace Merrit. "Professor Ark," she began.

He immediately corrected her. "Not Professor, I fear, though I have studied at some of the world's leading universities. What is your question?"

Before she could ask it the door chimes sounded again. Shelly rose to answer them and I heard her gasp as she opened the door. I walked through the hallway to see what was wrong. Shelly had backed away, hugging the wall, as a robed and cowled figure, all in black, entered the house carrying a long scythe whose blade appeared tipped with blood. "Sorry if I frightened you," a female voice said as she pushed back the cowl to reveal an attractive dark-haired woman in her early twenties. "I'm Mandy Snider. I wear this costume to get people in the proper mood for my talk."

"You're Death!" Shelly said, as if that explained everything.

"Well, yes. Miss Death. I should have warned you about the costume in advance. Boy, that's some curving road you've got out there. I almost went over the edge in the dark!"

Wayne Brady had followed me from the kitchen. "What is this?" he asked, prepared to do battle.

I explained it was just part of the show. "Are the Quilters meetings always like this?" I asked my wife.

She chuckled. "Usually they're quite dull."

"I can't wait to see Simon's face when Death walks into the room."

"Do you think it's wise?" she asked, suddenly alarmed. "He might do something violent."

"I doubt that," I replied, though I wasn't completely sure.

We listened while Simon completed his talk. To me it seemed scholarly and a bit dull, but the women applauded. Then Shelly came on to announce the arrival of their second speaker, billed as Miss Death.

The women gasped as the robed and cowled figure appeared in the doorway, and even Simon seemed a bit startled. He strode forward with a hand outstretched and for a moment I thought he was trying to ward off this evil creature. Then I realized he was offering to shake hands. Miss Death seemed surprised by the gesture and had to switch the bloody scythe to her left hand.

"My name is Ark, Simon Ark. I don't believe we've ever met."

"I . . . I'm Miss Death." She seemed so nervous that she pushed back the cowl again and added, "Mandy Snider."

The Quilters seated around the room gave some polite applause and the young woman launched into her talk. "I hope I didn't frighten any of you with my costume. No one likes to be confronted by death, whatever her age." She laid down the bloody scythe with a nervous laugh.

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I wondered how long she'd been doing this particular bit. Her nervousness surprised me. I retreated into the kitchen with Simon and Wayne Brady, and Shelly followed along to arrange the little buffet supper that had become the club's tradition. "Was Miss Death your idea?" I asked. "She looks like she's barely out of school."

"Actually, Mona Emberry saw an ad in the classifieds. Mandy's not very good, is she?"

I opened the door a bit and listened. She was standing in the center of the room, having removed the black robe to reveal jeans and a faded T-shirt from UCLA, not at all in keeping with her character. ". . . it is the beauty of youth we all pay for," she was saying. "Beauty at any cost. We never think about dying."

Grace Merrit, the former film star, was next into the kitchen. "That young woman is not for the Quilters. She should be speaking to her college sorority!"

"I'm sorry, Grace," my wife told her. "She sounded more mature on the telephone."

"What are we paying these performers?" she asked with a sweeping gesture that took in Simon Ark.

"Fifty dollars for Miss Death."

"I am performing free of charge," Simon informed her with exaggerated dignity. "But it is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Merrit. As I said earlier, I have long admired your work in the cinema and elsewhere."

She studied him with hard eyes. "There was no elsewhere, Mr. Ark. I made seventeen pictures in the nineteen forties and that was the end of it, unless you mean my two television appearances in the early fifties."

"I was referring to a group known then as the Faraway Quilters. All women, I believe, like the Quilters of today."

She turned away. "I know nothing of that."

"The group disbanded when the House Un-American Activities Committee began its investigation of the motion-picture industry. Though I doubt that the Faraway Quilters was any sort of Communist front organization."

"We played cards," she told us. "There were a dozen young film stars and we played cards and gossiped about the business."

The scattered applause from the family room told me that Miss Death had finished her presentation. Kate Brady came out to join her husband. "Well, at least Simon Ark was entertaining."

"See, Simon, you have a fan," I told him.

Shelly was busy herding the rest of them into the kitchen for the buffet. "Supper is served!" she announced. "Grab a plate."

"Did we decide on next month's meeting?" Mona Emberry asked.

Kate Brady spoke up. "It's at my house. That way Wayne won't

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have to drive me anywhere."

"What about a speaker?" Shelly inquired. "Or should we just gab?"

Grace Merrit was about to offer her opinion on that, but their youthful speaker, Miss Death, entered with a flourish. "I'm so glad that's over! I hope I wasn't too nervous."

"Perhaps you're in the wrong line of work," Grace suggested.

Shelly tried to smooth things over. "Here, Mandy. Have some food."

"Thanks, but I couldn't. Just something to drink and I'll be on my way. A beer if you have one."

Shelly took one from the refrigerator and opened it while Wayne Brady handed her a glass. She gave Mandy an envelope for her talk, which the young woman accepted with thanks. She removed the bill and slipped it into her wallet, asking, "Which one is Grace Merrit, the actress?"

"That's me," Grace said, none too happy about it.

"My grandmother knew you."

"I'll bet! What do you think I am, a hundred years old?"

"She'd be eighty-four if she were still alive."

Grace hesitated, and then asked, "What was her name?"

"Her screen name was Fran Clinger. She was in the Faraway Quilters with you out in Hollywood."

"That was a long time ago," Grace Merrit replied. "I don't remember the name."

"I was hoping—"

"Sorry. I don't remember her."

"She killed herself!" Mandy hurled the words like missiles. "She killed herself and you don't remember her?"

Mona Emberry stepped quickly between them. "Of course we remember your grandmother. But you'd better go now," she told the young woman.

Mandy Snider quickly finished the rest of her beer and gathered up her costume. As she headed for the front door she turned and said, "You haven't heard the last of me. I want to know why my grandmother died. I want to know the truth about the Quilters!"

Then she was gone.

"What was that all about?" Kate Brady asked. Some of the other women were voicing their displeasure at the scene.

"Where did you find her, Shelly?" Kate's husband asked. "That getup was really weird."

"I'm the one who mentioned her to Shelly," Mona Emberry admitted. "But I didn't expect anything like this."

"I'm sorry things got out of hand," my wife apologized. "I'm sure it won't happen again."

But just as it seemed the tempest had passed, Simon Ark asked, "Just what was the purpose of the Faraway Quilters?"

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Grace Merrit took a deep breath and gave her stock answer. "We played cards."

I was dreaming of a meeting of the Quilters, made up of glamorous Hollywood starlets remembered from my youth. Somehow Shelly was there, too. One minute there seemed to be a sex orgy complete with drugs, but then it turned into some sort of Communist front organization. I enjoyed it better as an orgy, but then I was awakened by Shelly pushing on my arm. "There's someone at the front door," she said, and I heard the insistent chimes ring again.

I rolled over to peer at the clock radio. "At seven-ten in the morning?"

"Go see who it is."

"Do I have to?"

"One of us does."

I grumbled and slipped into my robe. Downstairs, through the tiny windows in the front door, I could make out a uniformed policeman. That was always bad news at this hour of the morning. I opened the door and he asked, "Is this the residence of Shelly Constance?"

"That's my wife. She uses her maiden name sometimes."

"There was an accident overnight, down the hill. We believe the woman was coming from here, and I'm sorry to tell you she was killed in the crash. Her vehicle went off the road and it wasn't discovered for some hours."

"Killed? My God! Who was it?"

"A young woman named Mandy Snider."

Shelly had followed me downstairs when she heard her name mentioned. "What is it?"

"Your speaker last night, Miss Death. She was killed in an accident down the hill."

"How awful!"

"Had she been drinking while she was here?" the officer asked.

"No, she left right after—Oh, I think she did have a beer. But only one."

"You served it to her, Miss Constance?"

"It's Mrs.," she corrected, giving our last name. "She asked if we had a beer and I gave her one. The young woman was certainly not drunk on one beer."

"How did you know she was here?" I asked.

"The car was registered to a Veronica Brand. She told us Miss Snider borrowed it last night to speak to a women's group at your house."

"That's correct," Shelly said. "She spoke here, had one beer, and left about ten-thirty."

"Were you aware that Miss Snider was only twenty-one years old?"

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Shelly was immediately flustered, and I quickly took over. "Officer, drinking is legal at that age and she only had one. If you're implying something different I think we should have a lawyer present."

"That's entirely up to you, sir. I believe a detective will be coming by later to take her statement."

When he was gone, Shelly asked, "Should we call a lawyer?"

"For now let's just call Simon Ark."

I met Simon at the train and brought him to the house. A detective named Sergeant Mason had arrived during my absence, but assured us we did not need a lawyer.

"We have no plans to charge your wife with serving beer," he said. "We understand that you hired this woman from a classified ad for Miss Death. Only trouble is, she wasn't Miss Death."

Somehow that didn't surprise me. I told the detective about her amateurish performance. "But then how did she get here?" Shelly wanted to know. "And why did she come?"

"The owner of the car, Veronica Brand, is the real Miss Death, something of a local kook. She's the one you talked to on the phone. Two days ago Mandy Snider came to her house and offered her a thousand dollars if she could come here as Miss Death last night. She said she wanted to surprise an old family friend."

"A thousand dollars!" Shelly exclaimed. "I only paid her fifty bucks!"

"Exactly. It was big money to Veronica Brand and she readily accepted it. She even loaned Miss Snider her SUV for the night. It seems she came here to confront some old friend of her grandmother."

"There was a confrontation," Shelly agreed. "One of our members was a movie star in her youth. Mandy Snider said her grandmother was a member of their group and was driven to suicide."

"Is any of that true?"

"I have no way of knowing."

He made a few notes. "You gave her a beer before she left?"

"She asked for one. I opened it and handed it to her."

"Did she drink it from the bottle?"

"I think someone handed her a glass."

"What's the purpose of all these questions?" I wanted to know. "One beer could hardly have contributed to the accident."

Sergeant Mason closed his notebook. "That's correct. There was a minimum amount of alcohol in her blood. But this morning's autopsy turned up something much more significant: traces of chloral hydrate."

"Knockout drops?" Simon asked.

"Exactly. If someone here slipped them into her beer, there's no

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way she could have driven down that hill without crashing."

"Are you saying she was murdered?" Shelly asked.

"It appears likely," the detective answered. "I'll need the names and addresses of everyone who was here last night. How many are in this Quilters group?"

"Twelve, usually, but only eleven of us were here last night. Plus my husband and Simon Ark here. Oh, and Kate Brady's husband Wayne. He had to drive her. I guess that makes fourteen, not counting Mandy."

"What's your connection with all this?" the detective asked Simon.

"I was asked to give a brief talk on New Age topics."

"What's that?"

"Mysticism, astrology, and the like."

"What is this group, anyway?" Mason wanted to know.

"There's nothing sinister about us," Shelly assured him. "We talk and play cards. Sometimes we have a speaker."

She gave him the list he'd requested and he promised to get back to us. When the three of us were alone, Shelly said, "This is the first time I've been a suspect in a murder case."

"It seems we're all suspects," I told her. "What do you think, Simon?"

He pondered for a moment and then asked Shelly, "Why are there twelve women in the Quilters?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask Grace and Mona. I think they founded a similar group out in California when she was there."

"Back in the forties?"

"I guess so, yes."

"Did she ever refer to them as the Faraway Quilters?"

"I don't think so, Simon. They were just the Quilters, like our group."

"What was this California group?" I asked him.

"They were very secret, somehow connected with the motion-picture industry. There was a man—" Suddenly he said, "Come, my friend. We must interview the true Miss Death. If anyone can shed light on the victim, she can."

Shelly supplied us with Miss Death's phone number and she was awaiting our arrival. She had a modest garden apartment in town and she opened the door as Simon and I left the car. Veronica Brand was indeed something of a kook, as the police officer had said. Though she appeared close to fifty, she had flaming red hair and wore a long black dressing gown that covered her slender figure. When she reached out to shake our hands I caught sight of a massive tattoo that seemed to run up her right arm. "Found the place okay, huh?"

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"We're here," I agreed, stating the obvious.

"The cops already questioned me. Damn kid borrowed my car and then wrecked it!"

"How long had you known the victim?" Simon asked as she showed us into her apartment. The living room was decorated with a massive mural of a crouching dragon, breathing fire.

"Didn't know her at all! She showed up on Monday and offered me a thousand dollars cash if I'd let her take my place as Miss Death. Hell, that was more money than I could turn down. I showed her the costume and ran though my spiel with her."

"And sent this unknown person into a stranger's house?"

"She was only a kid. It's not as if she were Jack the Ripper, for God's sake!"

"What was her explanation for this stunt?" I asked.

"She wanted to surprise an old friend of her grandmother's."

"But how did she know my wife had hired you in the first place?"

"She'd telephoned one of the women last week from the West Coast, found her address on the Internet. The woman mentioned the meeting last night, and that they were having me as a speaker. So Mandy hopped a plane and came to me with her offer."

"Did she leave any possessions here at your place?"

"No, she had a hotel room in White Plains for a couple of nights. What she didn't have was a car, so she borrowed my SUV. I was a fool to let her."

"The police think someone at the party may have drugged her so she went off the road on the way down."

"Are you serious? She was only a kid."

"She had a bit of a confrontation with one of my wife's guests, an old film star named Grace Merrit. Name mean anything to you?"

Veronica Brand shook her head. "Never watch old movies. Tough enough keeping up with the new ones."

Simon spoke up then. "Did Miss Snider happen to mention a California group that was also called the Quilters, or the Faraway Quilters?"

"No. She told me nothing, but I liked the color of her money."

As we were leaving I said, "Sorry about your car."

"So am I."

Back in my car, I asked Simon, "Where to now?"

"Do you have a copy of Shelly's list of the Quilters members?"

"Sure."

"Let's pay a visit to Grace Merrit."

The former movie star's home was hardly palatial but it was several steps up from Veronica Brand's place. Located in Larchmont, the next town over from ours, it was one step farther along on the commuter line from Manhattan. A car was parked in her

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driveway so we weren't surprised to find another of the Quilters, Mona Emberry, inside with her. I remembered they'd come together the previous night.

Mona towered over the more petite Grace, and she immediately informed us that the police had just been there. "They're questioning all the Quilters. They think one of us slipped something into her beer."

"Did you?" Simon asked.

It was Grace Merrit who answered, conducting us into her living room. "Of course not! That girl was a bit flaky. She might have been on something before she arrived at Shelly's."

I seated myself gingerly on her brocaded sofa and said, "She couldn't have been on chloral hydrate or she'd have been unconscious. Someone had to slip it into her drink at the Quilters."

"Well, it wasn't me," Mona said, "or Grace, either! At our ages we don't go around feeding knockout drops to people, whatever the police might think."

"The dead woman tried to ask you about Hollywood, about a group called the Faraway Quilters that her grandmother belonged to. I believe you were its president for a time, Miss Merrit."

She tried to stare Simon down without answering, but finally relented. "Most of us served as president at one time or another."

"There were twelve members, as with the present Quilters?"

"Correct."

"Was there something special about that number?"

"We played bridge. That made up three tables."

"Sixteen would have made four tables," he pointed out. "I have wondered about the Faraway Quilters for years, ever since I learned of their existence. Isn't it true that there was a thirteenth member, a male?"

"Certainly not!" Mona Emberry insisted.

Simon turned his attention back to her. "Were you a member of the California Quilters, too?"

"I was," she admitted. "And we weren't a Communist front!"

"Who else among the present membership was a member then?"

"Only one," Grace answered. "Kate Brady, our youngest. She was still a teenager when the old Quilters disbanded."

"Why would a Hollywood teenager spend her free nights playing bridge?" he wondered. "Were all of you in the motion-picture business?"

"That's right," Grace acknowledged. "I suppose I was the most successful, but we'd all had parts."

Simon Ark studied the two women. "Your present interest in mysticism and spiritualism leads me to believe that the original Quilters must have had similar interests."

"Not at all!" Grace insisted. "We were strictly social."

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"There were twelve women and one man. What was his purpose? What did he contribute?"

"There was no man."

"I believe his name was Dr. Fritz Faraway," Simon insisted. "He was a practitioner of alternative medicine who'd lost his license as a regular doctor."

"What do you—?"

"Twelve women suggest to me a coven of witches, with a male wizard as its leader."

Both women laughed at the suggestion, perhaps a little too much. "Dr. Faraway spoke to us on a few occasions," Grace admitted. "But he was no wizard and we were no witches. Sometimes I wish we had been."

"What about this woman who killed herself, Mandy Snider's grandmother?"

"Fran Clinger suffered from depression. She was older than the rest of us and she hadn't been able to get work. She wanted something from us that we weren't able to give her. Suicide was her only way out. It was a foolish, tragic ending to a wasted life." Her voice seemed to waver as she spoke. "But this Mandy hadn't even been born yet then. Why would it mean anything to her?"

"That's all we can tell you," Mona Emberry said suddenly, rising to her feet. "You've tired Grace. I'll have to ask you to leave. I'll see you to your car."

We were hustled out the front door. "You certainly take good care of Grace," I commented.

"This whole business is my fault," she said, but then fell silent, glancing back at the house.

"The dead woman phoned you from California, didn't she?" Simon quickly asked. "She asked you about Grace and the others, and you were the one who told her about the Quilters and Miss Death."

"Yes. That was a terrible mistake."

"Why did she care so much about a grandmother she'd never known?"

Mona took a deep breath, perhaps deciding it was time to tell it all. "The Clinger family had money. It was Fran's failure at her career that drove her to suicide. Her money went to Mandy's mother with a proviso that any children of hers would receive a large sum on their twenty-first birthday. When Mandy turned twenty-one her mother told her the story and Mandy decided the Quilters were somehow to blame."

"What were the Quilters?" Simon asked quietly.

But Mona Emberry shook her head. "You'll have to get that from someone else. I've told you too much already."

I assumed we'd be visiting Kate Brady next, but Simon had some-

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thing else in mind. "That young woman came to the Quilters last night to confront Grace Merrit and the other old-timers from the original group. If she really wanted some sort of vengeance for her grandmother's suicide, she might have been carrying a weapon of some sort."

"She had a weapon, Simon. A scythe about six feet long. You overlooked the obvious."

"You underestimate me," he said with that slight smile of his. "I felt the scythe blade. It was rubber, covered with silver paint and a dab of red for blood. It was Veronica's costume, remember, used for these appearances."

So we drove over into town and found Sergeant Mason. "There was no weapon," he assured Simon. He produced a large evidence bag from a filing cabinet and spread the contents on his desk. "Purse, handkerchief, makeup, keys, address book, pencil, wallet, cell phone, cigarettes. We're contacting her family in California now."

"Any pictures in the wallet?"

"Girlfriends from high school, no guys. The usual things: California driver's license, a couple dollars in change, eighteen dollars in bills, a key card for her hotel room in White Plains. No drugs or pills of any sort."

"What about her return plane ticket?"

"We found that in the room with her suitcase. She was planning to fly back Monday."

Our next stop was the home of Kate and Wayne Brady. Their house was big and lived-in, with a basketball hoop over the garage door attesting to one or more sons. The children were all gone now, though pictures of two boys and a girl decorated the piano, and larger wedding photographs stood behind them.

"Grace phoned to warn me you'd probably be coming," Kate said, showing us inside. "She worried about what I might say."

Wayne Brady offered glasses of white wine and we both accepted. Then Simon asked, "What was it that you might say?"

"Oh, about California and the Quilters."

"And Dr. Faraway?"

"You know about him?" she asked, surprised.

"I have heard stories."

"It's not what you think."

"Then suppose you tell me what it was, so we can stop suspecting your husband of murder."

"What?" The blood drained from Wayne Brady's face. "What in hell are you talking about?"

"My friend here tells me you were in the kitchen with him when Mandy Snider arrived in her costume. She mentioned she'd almost gone off the road in the dark. And later, when Shelly handed her a

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beer, you supplied the glass. The knockout drops could have been in the bottom of that glass, unnoticed by any of us."

"Why would I kill her?"

"To protect the secret of the Faraway Quilters."

"There is no secret!" Kate insisted. "I don't know why Grace and Mona wanted to dig up that name from a half-century ago."

"Tell us about it," Simon urged.

She sighed and looked down, shaking her head. "You have to realize times were different then. Today actresses have all sorts of cosmetic surgery without anyone blinking an eye. Back in the forties we stopped getting work with the first sign of a facial wrinkle. They didn't need us. There were plenty of eighteen-year-olds ready and willing to take our places. Today it's called the 'Q' or quality factor—that indefinable something that makes someone attractive to people. How an actor or singer or politician rates in Q-factor polling can determine their future exposure to the public. They talked quietly about Qs back in the nineteen forties, too, and it could spell the end of an actress's career. It was the Q that gave Grace the idea for the Quilters. We would quilt and play cards, and the studio executives would never suspect that a former doctor named Faraway came to the meetings with his little black bag and injected our faces with all sorts of untried youth potions. They worked wonderfully on Grace for several years. They were a terrible disaster for poor Fran Clinger."

"So she killed herself," Simon Ark said, half to himself.

"She killed herself. Dr. Faraway is long dead, too, but Fran's granddaughter inherited that money when she turned twenty-one and came East to somehow avenge her grandmother."

"But why should one of you kill her?"

"We didn't!" Kate Brady insisted. "And neither did Wayne. Do you think any of us would carry knockout drops around with us in case there was an opportunity to use them? And they work so quickly that the poor girl would have been on her face before she ever reached the car."

"Come, my friend," Simon Ark said quietly. "We must not make another mistake."

Veronica Brand was painting her living room wall when we arrived, making some fiery additions to the dragon's breath. "Do you like it?" she asked, stepping back to admire her work. We'd come in after announcing ourselves through the screen door, and she was startled to suddenly realize that Sergeant Mason was with us.

"Perhaps they'll let you decorate your cell," Simon told her, "when you go to prison for killing Mandy Snider."

"You're crazy! I barely knew her!"

"Strangers kill strangers all the time, especially for money. You

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didn't let her borrow that car. You drove her to Shelly's house and waited outside in the dark. When she came out and told you about the confrontation you gave her a quick drink of something laced with chloral hydrate that knocked her out. Then you took what you wanted from her and steered the car off the road, making sure she died in the apparent accident. If foul play was suspected, you figured the Quilters would be blamed. You probably called a cab to take you home."

"What did I take from her?"

"Money, a great deal of money. When she paid you a thousand dollars cash to substitute as Miss Death you must have known there was lots more. She'd foolishly brought a portion of her inheritance with her."

"You think you can prove that? There was a houseful of people who could have drugged her."

"We saw her take the fifty-dollar fee from Shelly and place it in her wallet. It wasn't there after the accident. Someone must have been in the car with her, to drug her and take the money, and you were the most likely possibility. You took all the big bills, but you took one too many."

Sergeant Mason came over and recited her rights. It was as if she didn't hear him. "It was only a few thousand dollars," she grumbled. "Not even enough to pay for a new SUV."

"You won't be needing a car for a good long time," he told her. ●

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Art by June Levine

THE HUNCHBACK AND THE STAMMERER

by Edward Marston

The monastery of Saint Gall, 883.

My name is Notker, the St-St-St-St-ammerer.

Have no fear, my friends. I jest with you. Though my tongue betrays me whenever I open my mouth, my pen is as fluent as the stream that flows beside our monastery. Here I sit, old, weary, and toothless, shivering in this inhospitable place where I have lived out my days. The Benedictine house of Saint Gall is in the upland valley of the Steinach, in the German Swiss canton of Saint Gallen. It is bleak and remote. We suffer all the privations enjoined by the founder of the Order, and I, of course, your humble narrator, suffer the additional burden imposed upon me at birth. A stammer can cause endless amusement among those who can speak without impediment, but it is a

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heavy cross to bear for the stammerer himself.

Monks are capable of great cruelty. They tease me incessantly. My nickname is N-N-N-Notker even though that particular consonant is one over which I never stumble. Labials are my real enemies. My lips tremble at the very thought of them. But nothing terrorizes me more than the letter S. Ask me to tell you about saints such as Simeon Stylites or Simplicius or the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and I will hiss embarrassingly at you for hours on end. Like others who were born to stammer, I have learned to choose my words with care or, on occasion, to express myself in ways that require no speech at all. That is why I am drawn to tell this hitherto unpublished story about *Carolus Magnus,* the Emperor Charlemagne. It features a man not unlike myself in younger days: naive, devout, and deeply loyal to his ordained ruler. An unlikely hero, perhaps, but one who deserves praise. How many of you realize that Charlemagne's life was once saved by a monk with a pronounced stammer?

We also serve who only stand and bite our tongue.

Under his real name, Keith Miles, Edward Marston has already contributed several stories to *EQMM*. Like other work published under the Marston byline, this new story is historical, though it is set much earlier than the Elizabethan novels usually associated with the name. The sixth book in the Marston series featuring Elizabethan stage manager Nicholas Bracewell came out last August. Look for *The Bawdy Basket* (St. Martin's). ¶

Charlemagne is remembered primarily as a military leader, as a supreme general who fought over fifty campaigns in the course of his long life. Danes, Slavs, Saxons, Avars, Dalmatians, Lombards, and Spaniards alike found it impossible to resist the inexorable extension of his empire. Yet he was impelled by no mere lust for glory. Behind the recurring wars was a holy purpose. He strove to defend the Christianity of the West against the enemies who threatened it on all sides and, in the wake of his victories, he was able to promote the most wondrous renaissance of learning.

Charlemagne's renowned Palace School in Aachen was a haven for the finest scribes, teachers, scholars, and illuminators of manuscripts. No *scriptorium* before or since has ever rivaled the quality and quantity of the work that was published and disseminated from the Carolingian capital. Only one achievement was greater than the establishment of the Palace School and that was Charlemagne's choice of the man who was its head.

His name was Alcuin but his master called him by an affection-

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ate nickname.

"Greetings, Albinus."

"Welcome to the School, mighty King."

"It seems busier than ever," said Charlemagne, looking around the *scriptorium* with satisfaction. "Or are your scholars merely trying to impress me?"

"What you see now is what you would see on any day that you cared to visit us," said Alcuin proudly, indicating the rows of monks bent diligently over their work. "I impose stern discipline. It is the only way to ensure that our high standards are maintained. Lazy scholars have no place here."

"How does it compare with York?"

"Very favorably."

"In what way?"

"The most obvious," replied Alcuin. "When I began copying and editing texts in York Cathedral all those years ago, we never had more than three or four scribes at work. Here, as you see," he went on, waving a skeletal arm, "we have almost four dozen. This year we expect to produce over two hundred and fifty books."

"Excellent!"

"Much of the credit must go to you."

"Me?" said Charlemagne with a chuckle. "A man who cannot even write?"

"You appreciate the importance of books."

"What I appreciate is the genius of a certain Albinus."

Alcuin gave a weary smile. "My remaining hair is silver rather than white."

"You will always be Albinus to me."

"And you, my Imperial Highness, will always be King David to me."

Charlemagne gave another chuckle. His own nickname delighted him. It was an honor to be compared to such a commanding figure from the Old Testament. King David was a courageous soldier, a shrewd politician, a fond husband and father, a lover of beauty, poetry, and music. Believing himself to be in the same mould, Charlemagne was not blind to the fact that he, like David before him, also had an impressive retinue of concubines. It was something about which Alcuin ventured to tease him.

The contrast between the two men could not have been sharper. Charlemagne was tall, well-built, and powerful. He had a natural authority and a dignified bearing. His eyes were unusually large and set either side of a prominent nose. There was a worldliness about him that made others feel desperately provincial. Alcuin, on the other hand, was an ascetic, a native of Northumbria who had dedicated himself to learning at an early age and who had grown up within the hallowed walls of York Cathedral. The fair skin and

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white hair of a typical Anglo-Saxon had earned him the nickname of Albinus. Slight of build, he was a quiet, resolute, conscientious man who had distinguished himself as a scholar, teacher, and poet. Whatever reservations he might have about the darker sides of Charlemagne's private life were kept to himself. At the Palace School, he had been given an opportunity that every scholar in Christendom would envy.

"Are you happy here, Albinus?" asked Charlemagne.

"Sublimely so, David."

"Then why do I sense a note of wistfulness?"

"Wistfulness?" repeated Alcuin.

"Yes," said Charlemagne, studying him carefully. "I noticed it as soon as I came in. It is as if your body is here in Aachen but your mind is somewhere else."

"I am sorry if I give that impression."

"Do you still pine for York?"

"No, David."

"Are you sure? I would not blame you if you did."

"I still *think* of York," admitted Alcuin. "It holds many dear memories for me. When you were gracious enough to let me return there, I was filled with contentment, but I do not yearn to spend the last of my days in York. That chapter in my life is ended."

"Will you remain here in Aachen?"

"That is for my lord and master to decide."

"I would not hold you here against your will."

"My heart and mind belong to the Palace School for the moment," said Alcuin, not yet ready to confess that his real ambition was to become abbot of Tours. "But, if we are looking to the future," he continued, deftly turning attention away from himself, "we ought also to consider your own."

"Soldiers have no future, Albinus. The next battle could be my last."

"Then it behooves you to think about a successor."

"My eldest son, Charles."

"Not necessarily."

Charlemagne tensed. "You doubt his qualities?"

"Not at all, great King. All your sons are worthy of their illustrious father. What I beg leave to doubt is whether Charles will outlive you."

"Yes," sighed the other, "he is prone to recklessness on the battlefield. But he has fought bravely and deserves to take my throne in the fullness of time." He saw the glint in Alcuin's eye. "You *know* something, Albinus."

"Do I?"

"You can see into the future."

"Hardly."

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"Your predictions are invariably correct."

"They are simply wild guesses."

"Wild but accurate."

Alcuin shrugged his shoulders. "Place no reliance on me, David."

"I place every reliance on you," said Charlemagne. "Look what you have achieved here. Your learning is beyond compare, your counsel always sage. So tell me, Albinus," he pressed, taking a step closer, "who will succeed me?"

"Do you really wish to know?"

"I insist."

"Then I will give you my prediction," said Alciun. "It is Lewis."

Charlemagne gaped at him. "Lewis?"

"The youngest of your sons."

"Not Charles or even Pepin?"

"No," said Alcuin.

"But Lewis is so *pious.*"

"Piety is not out of place on an imperial throne."

"Only soldiers can build and hold together an empire."

"Nevertheless," said Alcuin with quiet conviction, "Lewis will be your successor."

The prophecy troubled Charlemagne. Though he was soon preoccupied with affairs of state, he never forgot the gentle confidence with which Alcuin had spoken. Could his friend be mistaken for once, or did Charlemagne have to accept that two of his beloved sons would die before he did? It was unsettling. Charlemagne was no ordinary father. Determined to give his children a proper training in the liberal arts, he insisted that his daughters should be educated alongside his three sons. While their brothers were taught to ride in the Frankish fashion, to bear arms, and to hunt, the girls learned to spin, weave, and acquire every womanly accomplishment so that they would not fritter away their time in idleness.

Though his sons were encouraged to marry, Charlemagne kept his daughters within his own household, arguing that he could not live without them. For such beautiful and spirited girls, this was bound to lead to extreme frustration and they relieved it by clandestine romances within the Court. Unlike his youngest son, none of his daughters could be accused of excessive piety.

The prediction about his successor haunted the family man. It was in Ratisbon that it took on a frightening immediacy. Charlemagne was returning from his war against the Slavs. Situated on the River Danube, Ratisbon was a pleasant town near the eastern rim of his empire. Its palace was a secure fortress where Charlemagne could refresh and restore himself in the wake of another triumph. But he was not allowed to relax for long. When he had been there only a few days, he had an unexpected visitor.

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"I must speak with you, Father."
"My ears are always open to you, my son."
"That is why I came."
"You have a request to make?"
"No, Father."
"Then how may I help you, Pepin?"
"By heeding my warning."
"Warning?" echoed Charlemagne.
"They mean to kill you."

Pepin the Hunchback was one of Charlemagne's many illegitimate children. His mother was called Himiltrude and she was a favored occupant of the royal bed. Whether it was out of love or pity, I do not know, but when Himiltrude brought the misshapen child of his lust into the world, Charlemagne felt constrained to bless it with the name of his own celebrated father, Pepin the Short, the first Carolingian King of the Franks.

Pepin the Hunchback was also short, twisted by Nature into a complicated knot that no midwife could even begin to untie. Despite his physical defects, however, the boy grew up to be able, intelligent, and proud of his birthright. During his childhood, he enjoyed the routine mockery of his playmates with surprising equanimity. Hunchbacks are stammerers made manifest. It is as if their bodies are permanently locked in hesitation between the womb and the world, not knowing whether to remain curled up in perpetuity or to straighten their backs into manhood.

Charlemagne had a sneaking fondness for Pepin the Hunchback. His handsome face resembled that of his mother so closely that it took Charlemagne's breath away. Was that cruel hump a judgment on the two lovers? The notion always caused a pang. If his bastard brought a warning, Charlemagne was ready to listen to it but it was important to display no fear.

"So they mean to kill me, do they?" he said with a grin. "This is old news, Pepin. They have been trying to murder me from the day I came to the throne."

"I am talking of a new plot, Father," said the hunchback.
"Who is it this time—Saxons or Danes?"
"Neither."
"Slavs, then?"
"No, Father."
"Then who?"
"Frankish conspirators."
"Never!" exclaimed Charlemagne.
"I would not speak out without evidence."
"My own people would not betray me."
"They have tried to do so in the past," said Pepin.

It was a painful reminder. Charlemagne bit back a reply. Plots

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had been hatched against him throughout his reign but they were usually inspired by agents of foreign powers. Intrigue at Court had brought treachery nearer home, and it had been a sobering experience for Charlemagne. When the conspirators were exposed, he had ordered their execution, but he could never feel entirely safe again in Aachen. Doubling his bodyguard, he took more precautions than ever. As he considered the last plot against him, he recalled that Pepin the Hunchback had been instrumental in revealing that as well. His bastard was perhaps the best bodyguard of them all.

"Who are these men?" demanded Charlemagne.

"One moment, Father," said the hunchback solemnly. "Before I speak, I must exact a promise from you. What I am about to say may cause you distress. It will certainly be met with disbelief. Promise me that you will hear me out."

"Of course."

"No matter how angry you may feel?"

"Why should I be angry?"

"Any father would be in your position."

Charlemagne bridled. "What do you mean?"

"You see?" asked Pepin ruefully. "Your eye is aflame. You are roused already. How can I tell my tale when I know that you will rage and interrupt? Father," he said, kneeling down in front of him, "I am an unwilling messenger. I hate the tidings that I bring. Only concern for your safety makes me pass them on."

"Well?"

Pepin glanced over his shoulder. They were alone in a private room at the palace but he feared that someone might be listening outside the door. He lowered his voice to a whisper. Charlemagne did his best to rein in his temper.

"There was a man called Werinbert," began Pepin, hand on his father's arm. "He was a creature of mine, an unlovely fellow but a cunning intelligencer. It was he who first caught wind of the plot, but he was discovered by the conspirators when he eavesdropped on them. They attacked him without mercy. Werinbert was left for dead. Fortunately, I got to him while there was still a specter of life in him."

"What did he tell you?"

"Everything that he had overheard."

"Go on."

"You are to be killed here in Ratisbon."

"By whom?"

"A group of Frankish nobles."

"Give me names, Pepin," ordered Charlemagne. "Unmask the villains."

"I wish that I could, but Werinbert, alas, was not able to identify any of those he overheard. He had no time," explained Pepin.

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"What he did do, however, was to get a clear idea who is behind the conspiracy."

"Speak his name. He will be arrested at once."

The hunchback sighed. "It is not as simple as that, Father."

"Why not?"

"This is where you must hold back your anger. When you learn what Werinbert told me, you will be furious. You will refuse to believe that it is even possible and I will be tainted for having brought you such disturbing news. Believe me," said Pepin with tears in his eyes, "the revelation hurt me deeply as well. It hurt me and disgusted me. After all, I, too, have blood ties with him."

"With whom?" said Charlemagne, lifting him to his feet. "With whom?"

"Calm down, Father."

"How can I remain calm in the face of such an allegation?"

"It is more than an allegation," urged Pepin. "It cost Werinbert his life."

"And what did the wretch hear?"

"Something that I could not even imagine to be true at first."

"Tell me."

"The leader of the conspiracy is one of your own sons."

Charlemagne was torn between shock and incredulity, stunned by the revelation yet unable to accept it. His sons were his closest friends, trusted allies of his heart from whom nothing was hidden. It was impossible that one of them should turn against him.

"Werinbert did not secure a name," Pepin went on. "But he was left in no doubt that it was from your own flesh and blood that danger would come. The men were boasting about it. 'Poor blind Charlemagne!' one of them said. 'He does not realise that he is nurturing a viper in his bosom. Force is power. Like father, like son.' Those are the very words that were spoken."

"Werinbert was lying to you," asserted Charlemagne.

"He was telling the truth, Father. Dying men have no cause to lie."

"My sons revere me."

"I know that *I* do," said Pepin firmly. "And so should they."

"Yet one of them is preparing to lift his hand against me? No, it is inconceivable."

"Therein lies its chance of success. Because you do not fear attack from that quarter, you have no defense against it. Your sons have ready access to you. They know your movements. Who better to direct assassins against you?"

"Stop!" yelled Charlemagne. "I'll hear no more."

"Let me and my men protect you, Father."

"There is no need."

"We will shield you against the Devil himself."

"None of my children would *dare* to strike at me, Pepin."

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"I hope and pray that that is true," said the hunchback with burning sincerity. "But I felt that I had to tell you what Werinbert overheard. His information has always been reliable in the past, and I see no reason to distrust it now. Your life is in danger, Father. I offer you a secret bodyguard that will ward off any assault. Accept that offer," he argued. "One of your sons means to kill you."

Worried by Alcuin's prediction, Charlemagne was alarmed by the warning from Pepin the Hunchback. When he was left alone to reflect on what he had heard, he wondered if the words of the two men might not be in some way linked. Was the master of the Palace School telling him the same thing as his bastard? The distraught father agonized for hours on end. Of his three sons, Charles had least cause to enter a conspiracy. He was the acknowledged heir and would succeed in due course. Why kill his way to a throne that was his by right? It was perverse.

Pepin, the second son, whose legitimacy was attested by a powerful physique that set him apart from his namesake, the hunchback, was another unlikely assassin. He had led Frankish armies against the Huns and the Avars. His father had made him King of Italy, and Pepin was thrilled with his beautiful kingdom. Charles, too, of course, was a dashing warrior who commanded armies in Bohemia and Lunenberg. If it was Pepin who conspired to kill his own father, he would have to remove Charles as well because his elder brother stood between him and the throne.

Charlemagne's mind was tormented by Alcuin's prophecy. According to the saintly old scholar, Lewis would succeed his father. Yet he was the most peace-loving of all three sons. As the appointed King of Aquitaine, he was more concerned with ruling by Christian example than with anything else. For him to succeed to the throne, a father and two elder brothers had first to be removed. Was it possible that Lewis could contemplate the assassination of the three people he loved most in the world? His conscience would never permit such hideous thoughts.

And yet he, in Alcuin's opinion, was the designated heir. How could that be? Charlemagne wrestled with the question. Was there some bizarre agreement between all three brothers to kill their father in order to place Lewis on the throne? His piety would make the youngest son the most acceptable to the Pope. Charlemagne liked to portray himself as the defender of Christianity but there were many, even in the Vatican, who considered him to be no more than a holy barbarian.

"Dear God!" he said to himself. "Pope Leo!"

It was a timely reminder that piety was no guarantee of civilized behavior. Pope Leo III had been attacked by the citizens of Rome, true Catholics to a man, who tried to blind their pontiff and cut out

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his tongue. Fleeing to Charlemagne's camp at Paderborn, he had sought solace and help. The following year, Charlemagne entered Rome and set the Pope back in power. Almost exactly a month later, on Christmas Day, 800, Leo III crowned him Emperor and Augustus in St. Peter's Cathedral. Behind the pomp and magnificence of the occasion lay the ugly fact that the Pope had once been expelled by the very people who were, in effect, his own children.

If rough hands could be laid upon a Pope, why should an emperor be spared? If the spiritual leader of Christendom could be arraigned, among other things, for keeping mistresses, then Charlemagne himself was bound to be condemned for the same reason. Alcuin might tease him about his many concubines, but he still disapproved of them. Lewis had never been able to accept his father's random promiscuity. Was he intent on replacing a sinful emperor with a devout Christian? How and when would he strike?

Charlemagne swung between disbelief and apprehension. His heart told him that none of his three sons would plot against him, but his mind was less certain. The son who demanded the closest scrutiny was Pepin the Hunchback. Why had he brought the grim tidings and how seriously should they be taken? Charlemagne was bound to wonder if his bastard was activated by envy of his half-brothers, legitimate offspring who had no physical defects and who enjoyed great power in their own right. At the same time, he had been moved by the patent reluctance with which the hunchback had imparted the news. Pepin did not want to accuse any of them of plotting against their father. And what did he stand to gain by making a false allegation?

It was time to act. Charlemagne dispatched spies of his own to make discreet inquiries. Reports seemed to justify the hunchback's warning. Werinbert, a man in his service, had indeed died that very day of terrible injuries. Charles, the eldest son, had mysteriously disappeared from Ratisbon. His brother, Pepin, King of Italy, had also quit the town without warning, his excuse being that he was travelling to Rome for an audience with the Pope. Most disturbing of all was the fact that Lewis, the pious King of Aquitaine, had sent word that he was on his way to Ratisbon. Why? Fear took a stronger grip on Charlemagne. As he weighed all three sons in the balance, he found each one of them wanting and asked himself if Pepin the Hunchback might yet turn out to be the most upright of his progeny.

As night began to fall, his fears were intensified. Charlemagne needed help from the one person in whom he had total faith, but Alcuin was far away in Aachen.

"Albinus!" cried the emperor. "What am I to *do?*"

The five conspirators met in St. Peter's Church at the heart of Ratisbon. Most of them were Frankish nobles, men of high posi-

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tion who each nursed a grievance against their emperor. In the flickering candlelight, their faces were hard and determined. Their plans were discussed in the shadow of the huge golden crucifix.

"When will we strike?" asked one.

"Tomorrow," decided their leader.

"Where?"

"Here in the church."

A third man had scruples. "On hallowed ground?" he said with alarm.

"Yes," replied the leader. "It is the one place where he will be at our mercy."

"That may be," agreed the other, "but it will hardly gain us God's blessing."

"Where better to kill a devil than in the Lord's own house? What kind of prayers can this monster offer up when he kneels before the altar? Does he ask forgiveness for the hanging of four and a half thousand Saxons in one day at Verden? Does he seek divine approval for the way he betrays his marriage vows? Does he apologize for the wickedness with which he has treated us? No, my friends," said their leader. "It is not humility that puts him on his knees but exultation. I am closer to him than any of you and I have seen the true Charlemagne. My father, our Christian emperor, our so-called defender of the faith, is no more than a gloating tyrant. He must die."

There was general agreement. Objections to the venue for the assassination were soon dropped. It only remained to work out the final details. Each man was anxious to wield the fateful dagger. When everything was finally settled, the conspirators were about to depart. Their leader, however, was circumspect.

"First, let us search the church," he ordered.

"But there is nobody here," said one of his companions. "The place is empty."

"That is how it appears, but we must make certain. Dangerous words have been spoken in here tonight. If nobody has overheard us, then my father's life is forfeit. If, however, somebody *is* lurking in here," warned the leader, wagging a finger, "then our own lives are at risk. Search thoroughly, my friends."

They did as he told them and conducted a careful search of the entire church. Candles were used to illumine the darkest corners. The leader's caution was wise. From beneath an altar in the Lady Chapel, they plucked the shivering figure of a young cleric. His name was Stracholf the Stammerer and he had never stammered so violently in his entire life. Though they beat him soundly, they could get no comprehensible words out of him. One of the men held a dagger to the young man's throat.

"Stop!" said the leader. "Do not kill him."

"It is the only way to ensure his silence," insisted the other.

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"We do not want more blood on our hands than is necessary. To slay a tyrant is one thing; to murder a holy man is quite another. I will not condone it. Besides," said the leader, "there is a much simpler way to keep that mouth of his shut."

Stracholf was dragged across to the Bible that lay open on the lectern. The cleric was ordered to place his hand on Holy Writ while an oath was dictated to him. He was ordered to swear that he would reveal nothing of what he had heard. Terrified to resist them, Stracholf could not get out the two words that would appease them.

"I s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s . . ."

"Swear, man!" yelled the leader.

"I s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s . . ."

"Swear!"

The dagger was held once more against his throat to cut through his stammer.

"I s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-swear!" gasped Stracholf.

Then he collapsed in a dead faint.

Charlemagne had no sleep that night. Spurning the comfort of a woman, he retired to his bedchamber alone. Seven doors stood between him and the outside world, but that thought did not console him. A hundred doors would not keep out a son bent on killing him. If there really was a plot, he decided, then it had to be the work of his youngest son, Lewis. The King of Aquitaine was, in the considered opinion of Alcuin, the one who would succeed to his father's throne. Piety was a capacious cloak for ambition. Lewis would certainly envisage himself as a far worthier defender of the faith. He would not be the only ruler to seize power by assassinating a wicked father. Complete exoneration would surely follow. Charlemagne was shocked to realise that he had broken the bond so completely between father and son. Lewis might be guilty but he himself was not free from blame.

He was still writhing on his bed with remorse when he heard the laughter from the adjoining room. The womenfolk sounded as if they were playing some kind of game. Shrieks of mirth and uncontrollable giggling found their way through Charlemagne's door. He went to investigate. The queen and his daughters occupied the neighboring room, attended by their maids. All of them seemed to be involved in the commotion. When he flung open the door, Charlemagne was confronted by the strangest of sights. Laughing and giggling, the womenfolk were flitting about the room, pulling up their garments to cover their faces, pretending to hide in corners or behind curtains.

The object of their amusement was a pale, thin, frightened young cleric, wearing no more than a linen surplice. He was hardly a threat to the virtue of the ladies present, yet they were behaving as if he

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had come to take his pleasure at will. Puce with embarrassment, the newcomer stood in the middle of the room and quaked visibly.

"Be quiet!" roared Charlemagne. "Who is this man?"

"He is unable to tell us," said one of the women, setting off the cachinnation once more. "The poor fellow cannot even s-s-s-s-s-say his own n-n-n-n-n-name."

Stracholf flung himself at the emperor's feet and looked up at him. Words might befuddle Charlemagne, but he could read despair in a man's eyes. Only something of great importance could have brought the cleric to him. Rebuking his womenfolk with a stare, he took the hapless visitor into his own chamber and shut the door behind them.

Stracholf stammered incoherently.

"Slowly, my friend," said Charlemagne, holding up a palm. "Let your tongue catch up with the words before you try to utter them."

It was sound advice, but Stracholf was in no state to accept it. The emperor's life was in danger, and that fact robbed him of articulate speech. His oath had been discarded. Imposed by force, it had no real power to bind him, and he had made his way to the palace to raise the alarm. Unfortunately, he got no further than the adjoining room where the women had ridiculed the matching defects of his virginity and his stammer. Stracholf had at last been admitted to Charlemagne's presence. Tears of gratitude coursed down his cheeks. The emperor wanted an explanation.

"Why have you come?" he asked.

With his tongue in open revolt, Stracholf made a series of vivid gestures.

"You bring a warning?" said Charlemagne.

The cleric nodded. Robbed of speech and seeing the futility of writing down words that could not be read, he went into an elaborate mime. He crossed to the table on which a small crucifix stood and knelt before it in prayer. Then he lay beneath the table as if about to go to sleep. A hand to his ear, he sat up to listen.

Charlemagne was quick to understand. "You were sleeping in church when you heard something?" he said. Stracholf nodded. "Was it to do with me?"

Nodding once more, the cleric got to his feet and pretended to draw a dagger from its sheath. When Charlemagne was threatened with the invisible weapon, he stumbled back a few paces. This mute individual was repeating the warning he had already received from someone else. Conspirators had been plotting inside the church. Tensing himself, Charlemagne asked the question that had dogged him all evening.

"Which of my sons was involved?" he demanded.

Stracholf picked up one of the pillows from the bed and stuffed it up the back of his surplice, bending over until his body threw a

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grotesque shadow upon the wall. The emperor put a hand to his mouth in horror.

"Pepin the Hunchback!"

Stracholf nodded and tossed the pillow back onto the bed.

"Who else conspired with him?" Stracholf held up four fingers. "Four of them? Could you pick them out for me?" An affirmative nod was given. "Thank you," said Charlemagne with a mixture of gratitude and sadness. "You have saved your emperor, but deprived him of a son whom he once loved and trusted. My women-folk will be justly chastened when they hear what you have done." He put a hand on the other's shoulder. "What is your name, my friend? Can you tell me?"

"Yes, your Imperial Highness," said the cleric boldly. "It is Stracholf."

And for the first time in his life, he spoke without a stammer.

Justice was swift and brutal. Pepin the Hunchback was arrested. Identified by Stracholf, the other conspirators were quickly rounded up. Summary execution ensued for them but Pepin's life was spared. In warning his father that his life was threatened by one of his sons, he had, in a sense, been telling the truth, but only in order to win Charlemagne's confidence. Instead of coming from his legitimate offspring, the threat arose from a bastard with the ill-omened name of Pepin. To establish credence, he had even hacked his own man, the innocent Werinbert, to death. The hunchback was exiled to the poorest and most austere place in the entire empire, in short, to this very Monastery of Saint Gall where I have penned this history.

There is an ironic footnote. Because it is so cold in this God-forsaken place, Pepin the Hunchback, bitten hard by the fangs of winter, spoke through chattering teeth and ended up as a fully fledged stammerer. Whereas I, Notker the Stammerer, spent so much time bent over my table as I wrote his story down that I acquired a hunchback of my own.

Don't you think that is s-s-s-s-s-s-ignificant? ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Notker was writing seventy years after the death of Pepin the Hunchback but much of his account has some truth in it. Charlemagne was betrayed by his illegitimate son and the plot was unmasked by a stammering cleric, though not perhaps in the way envisaged here. Alcuin's prediction was accurate. The two eldest sons predeceased Charlemagne. Pepin, King of Italy, died in 810. Charles died the following year. Charlemagne himself died in 814 and was succeeded by Lewis the Pious, who ruled until his death in 840. Alcuin of York had already ended his days in the way that he hoped—as abbot of Tours.

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The Survival of Miss Todd

by Gwen Moffat

The following story by Gwen Moffat has never before appeared in print, but it did air on BBC radio sometime in the 1960s. It should be of particular interest to the author's fans in that its protagonist is a forerunner of her popular series character Melinda Pink. The latest book in that series, *Retribution*, was published in England in 2002 and is available in the U.S. in large print (as are several other Moffat novels).—EQ

Miss Todd had waited a year for him to come back. She'd stopped typing for a moment and was staring across the lawn when she heard the drumming. She tried to focus on the dead sycamore but she could see only the blurred outline of its trunk. She removed her reading spectacles with shaking hands. The woodpecker was perched against the tree, his black and white back quivering with tension, his bill rattling away at the wood. Then he stopped, flew down, and inspected a hole. This hadn't been there last April when a pair had come and prospected, and flown away. Miss Todd had made the hole herself, standing on a kitchen chair and stabbing with a skewer.

The bird pecked at the bark and Miss Todd held her breath. With the scarlet flash on his nape, the woodpecker was like a visitor from the tropics. The female appeared, and together the pair started to enlarge the hole. Miss Todd was enthralled. "Really," she breathed, "I am most fortunate."

The first cuckoo, the first swallow: These were events in her year eclipsing even the first primrose, but nothing could compare with a pair of great spotted woodpeckers come to nest in her garden.

Until she retired Miss Todd had been secretary to an accountant. Living with an invalid mother, her life had been busy but it lacked romance—Miss Todd's kind of romance, that is. Through

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forty years of high finance and home nursing she cherished a dream of living in wild country, and when her mother died she took her small legacy and her savings and bought a croft house in the West Highlands. Then she started to write.

In ten years she wrote ten romantic novels. They were never reviewed in national newspapers but they brought in a few thousand pounds a year. Not enough for even her frugal lifestyle but she augmented her income by writing nature notes for the local paper and with illustrated lectures on the countryside.

This April morning, staring entranced at the woodpeckers on the dead tree, she saw more than two birds preparing a nest site; she saw a new sequence of colour slides for the village halls next winter, she saw all the summer's nature notes with the woodpeckers' progress like a serial. She even allowed herself to dream of a book: *My Life With the Highland Birds,* or maybe *Denizens of the Glen.* By the time she had convinced herself that the birds would stay, she had forgotten lunch. Empty with hunger and excitement, she drove to the village for a frozen fish pie.

The store was crowded with local wives who seethed with indignation. The telephone kiosk had been vandalised and young Willie MacKenzie—too strapped for cash to afford phone bills—going out at two in the morning to ring for an ambulance to fetch his wife, who was starting her second, had been forced to rouse the minister for the use of his telephone.

"It's criminal!" exploded Shuna Campbell, who ran the store. "Shooting's too good for 'em."

The others supported her vehemently, except Miss Todd, who asked after the new baby.

"It isn't the local lads. . . . " Deliberately Shuna left it hanging but everyone knew what she meant. The pony-trekking centre had taken on two new hands recently: not country boys but from somewhere down south, Glasgow probably. Miss Todd thought they had *unformed* faces: loose and pale with blank eyes. She'd heard they drank a lot, and although she didn't like gossip—not that kind of gossip—she'd ignored them when they thumbed her for a lift one night. They'd been holding each other up on the grass verge. She'd been disturbed, even a little frightened, because they would have a long walk home and she knew they would have recognised her old Volvo. It was the only one in the area. When she met them some days later, walking in the glen with their guns, they grinned at her but they didn't speak. She didn't like those grins; their eyes hadn't changed.

Since they'd come to the village there had been a spate of incidents: telephone kiosks wrecked, cars taken and found miles away—with no fingerprints, the policeman's wife told Miss Todd, and everyone knew from the television that people who left no

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prints most likely have a criminal record. The village hadn't been the same this spring.

Some weeks went by and Miss Todd knew that her woodpeckers were sitting on eggs. The village, proud of what they called their "authoress," followed the birds' progress with interest.

"They must be about to hatch," Miss Todd announced proudly to Shuna one afternoon.

"There! And how many eggs, Miss Todd?"

She drove home deploring the ignorance of folk who thought you could find out how many eggs a bird was sitting on without disturbing it. She put her shopping basket on the kitchen table and went to the living room to look at the tree.

In the grass at the foot of the trunk was a splash of black and white. She stared. Nothing moved in the garden.

She went out and approached the sycamore. The female lay dead among the withered daffodils.

She picked up the body, so small, so light in the hand. There was a smear of blood on the white feathers.

When she was thinking clearly again she went indoors and got out the chopping board and a sharp knife. Very carefully she plucked the bird, laying the feathers in a little heap. Shortly she found the first piece of gunshot.

She wrapped the body, the plucked feathers, and the shot in a piece of silk and buried the package below the sycamore. There was no sign of the male bird and she knew he wouldn't come back. She recalled seeing the two lads from the trekking centre coming up the lane as she drove to the village. They had been carrying their guns.

The following night she was lecturing on the other side of the pass. She left early because she couldn't work beside the open window that looked out on the dead tree. She drove slowly over the mountain, trying to fill in time.

About two-thirds of the way up, right on a hairpin bend, the road had been widened to make a passing place. The gradient was very steep here, and she usually took the hairpins in a rush with her wheels spinning and her teeth clenched. But today the hill held no terrors; she was purged of fear, she even welcomed the prospect of danger.

She stopped at the big hairpin and pulled into the passing place. She switched off the engine, left the car in gear, and stepped out.

There was a kestrel hovering above the trees in the gorge far below; she could see its chestnut back against the new leaves. She sighed and stared idly at the mountainside dropping away below her for several hundred feet until the turf met the lip of the gorge. There a hidden burn ran below cliffs that must be all of eighty feet high. There was no wall below the passing place; if a car failed to round the hairpin on the way down, the occupants didn't stand a chance.

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On the top of the pass there was a big weatherproof box containing a stretcher and first-aid equipment. Originally it had been placed there for injured mountaineers, but its contents had been taken out more than once for motorists, although when rescuers reached the smashed cars in the gorge it had been too late for any kind of treatment.

Miss Todd returned to her car and, to her surprise, managed to start on the hill and negotiate the rest of the bends without incident.

Her lecture that evening was a success, and she was detained for some time answering questions. It must have been eleven o'clock when she came slowly up the far side of the pass and saw the summit cairn in her headlights. There was a van parked beside the cairn. She felt the vague uneasiness which always came in lonely places at night on such occasions, but this time she saw people clearly, not as embarrassing shapes in the back of the vehicle. Two men were standing beside the box that housed the rescue stretcher. The box was open and the stretcher lay on the ground. They were smashing it with a sledgehammer.

They would have been making too much noise to hear her approach, and a spur of the mountain hid her lights until the last moment. Besides, as they looked up, startled and lurching against each other, she saw that they were drunk. She recognised them immediately: the pale loose faces and the pale eyes, hostile now. They knew her car and they'd guess that she was alone.

One stepped into the road, then wavered back as she floored the accelerator. She heard savage shouts.

She didn't think, didn't work things out. She knew the consequences: They had been caught in the act and now the other outrages would be tied to them. She would go straight to the police when she reached the village. They could get away in the van (which was surely stolen) but she had an eye for detail and a good memory; she had its number. And then she saw the snag. She was the only person who *knew.*

Before she reached the first downhill bend she saw headlights in her mirrors. They gained rapidly and at the second hairpin they were a few yards behind. On this single-track road there was no room to pass. She waited for them to sound their horn, expecting a continuous blast, but all she heard was the whine of the van in low gear, looking for the chance to overtake.

The road widened for the curve and they swung out to pass on her off side. She pulled over, blocking them. The van dropped back and swung to the other side but now they were round the curve, the road narrowed, and she saw their lights tilt in the driving mirror. She had squashed them into the mountain and their wheels had gone in the ditch.

On the straight stretch the van nosed up again on the off side

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and she felt a bump. Now they were trying to force her off the road. She saw the van's fender edging forward, she felt a nudge. Below and ahead she saw the start of the hairpin where she had stopped that afternoon. She braked before the bend and pulled close to the hill. The van roared and swerved into the passing place on her right. As it did so she sent the heavy car diagonally across the road, twisting the wheel at the last moment for the bend, so she caught the van only a glancing blow between its near-side wheels, but that was enough. The driver, who'd had inches to spare before, now had nothing. He couldn't make it back to the road; thrust sideways and forward by the big car, the van tilted above the drop. She had a brief glimpse of its side lifting, the curious indecency of its exposed belly with helpless wheels turning in the air, then she was rounding the bend and the next, her hands clenched on the steering wheel.

She stopped on the straight and wound down the window. She heard the clank of metal on stone with long pauses between; she saw great shafts of light wheeling down the mountain; there was a crumpling crash and the lights went out.

There was silence for a moment, then a white glare in the gorge. Flames climbed the trees, throwing the mountain into black relief. There were crackling sounds and little popping explosions. Miss Todd was reminded of woodpecker colours and pork roasting in the oven. ●

The Hound

by C. McArthur

Clouds scudding past a crescent moon, the moor miasma-bound,
Your blood turns icy as you hear the baying of a hound.
Your sins are all remembered, those dark deeds that you did,
That tuppence brazenly purloined when you were but a kid.

That promise that you uttered and so speedily forgot,
The copybook you ruined with that unsightly blot.
You cursed, sir, and you cheated; you coveted a wife,
You're having second thoughts now so near to end of life.

You treated servants rudely and paid them badly, too,
But too late for atonement—the hound has come for you.
You never asked but ordered and in a tone so shrill,
And no one could oppose you, my dear Baskerville.

Sharp fangs will shred your flesh, sir, your screams will fill the night,
He'll do you quickly, doubtless, but he will do you right.
The beast is near approaching—yes, kneel down in the grass,
Fat lot of good 'twill do you for Heaven is turned to brass.

Egads, must be your lucky day! 'Tis not the dreaded hound,
But merely closest neighbor from village homeward-bound.
Yes, best you thank the Lord above that you've been spared the muzzle,
'Tis the vicar, Thomas Fenton, out walking his Jack Russell.

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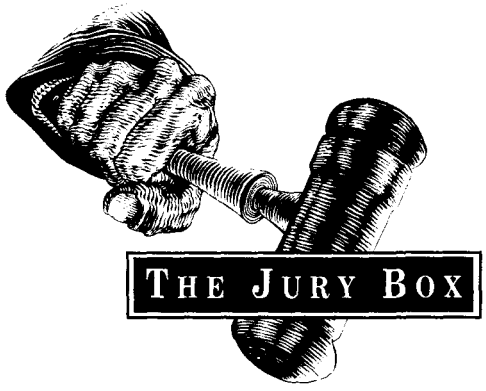

by Jon L. Breen

Sherlock Holmes pastiches almost always make enjoyable reading, perhaps because they are motivated at least as much by love of the characters and their world as by commercial considerations. Several strategies available to those concocting new adventures for the Baker Street sleuth are represented in the titles considered below: have a go at one of Watson's unrecorded cases (Vanneman); write a sequel to one of the canonical tales (Millett, Hall); involve Holmes in real historical mysteries (Thomas, Douglas); arrange the meeting of Holmes and Watson with historical personages (Thomas, Douglas); involve them with characters from other fictional worlds (Batory); put another character from the Holmes series in the leading role (Douglas); give Holmes a new Watson (King); or invent a wholly new case for the Great Man without resorting to any of the gimmicks listed above (Andrews, Roberts).

*** Laurie R. King: *Justice Hall,* Bantam, $23.95. In the early '20s, Holmes and his wife-cum-smarter-Watson, Mary Russell, visit a grand estate in the hope of helping the uncomfortable Duke (previously known to them as a Bedouin nomad!) extricate himself from familial duty. Though too leisurely for some palates, the novel offers a satisfactory plot, extensive details of such upper-crust pursuits as shooting parties and after-dinner port rituals, and moving flashbacks to the tragic experiences of a World War I combat officer. Of the books under review, this is the only one recommended to those indifferent to Holmes or hostile to pastiches.

*** Donald Thomas: *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice from the Crypt,* Carroll & Graf, $25. Writing as Francis Selwyn in the 1970s, Thomas helped popularize historical mystery fiction. The successor to his 1997 collection, *The Secret Cases of*

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Sherlock Holmes, one of the finest volumes of pastiche extant, is nearly as good. "The Two 'Failures' of Sherlock Holmes" (involving Crippen and Oscar Wilde) is followed by five longish stories (including the novella-length title piece), all cleverly incorporating real cases. Most interesting is "The Case of the Hygienic Husband," in which Holmes foils serial bridegroom George Joseph Smith.

*** John Hall: *Sherlock Holmes and the Adler Papers,* Breese, $14.95. Hall is one of several writers turning out new cases for Holmes under the reliable Breese imprint. In this sequel to "A Scandal in Bohemia," in which Irene Adler sets the Baker Street team on yet another hunt for "the papers," a strong vein of humor makes the somber ending all the more startling.

*** Val Andrews: *Sherlock Holmes and the Holborn Emporium,* Breese, $12.95. As Christmas 1903 draws near, the proprietor of a huge London department store, which includes among its attractions both a magic department and a basement circus, asks Holmes to investigate anonymous threats and acts of sabotage. A country house and a fox hunt also figure in this relaxed, unpretentious, economical pastiche from the most prolific writer in the Breese stable.

*** Barrie Roberts: *Sherlock Holmes and the Crosby Murder,* Carroll & Graf, $24. Despite its drab title, this a colorful adventure of a murdered yachtsman, his missing American cohort, decapitated bodies and shrunken heads. The author of five previous Holmes pastiches, British lawyer Roberts is a purist, hewing closely to the Doyle style including a section, though presented in dialogue rather than narrative, of back story set in the American West, and an action finale with no particular whodunit surprise. Adding to the fun are Roberts's seventeen pages of mock scholarly notes to imply the narrative's authenticity, including the straight-faced statement that "there is a virtual industry in the production of forged Watson manuscripts at the moment."

** Larry Millett: *The Disappearance of Sherlock Holmes,* Viking, $23.95. The author's fifth American-based pastiche, a sequel to "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," saddles the Baker Street detective with an unlikely romantic involvement. Delivering this time an action chase (London to New York to Chicago) instead of a classical puzzle, Millett is strong on locale and historical tidbits, but below the mark on prose and dialogue—some of the third-person narrative reads like a dime novel. Millett's section of notes is even more extensive than Roberts's.

** Dana Martin Batory: *The Federation Holmes,* The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, $28. A dozen tales first published in the fanzine *The Holmesian Federation* between 1978 and 1991, plus one new to print, transport

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Holmes and Watson to the world of *Star Trek*. The author's deep knowledge of both universes makes the unlikely recipe surprisingly enjoyable. One of Holmes's early successes depends on cultural differences of the Victorian era enduring in the 22nd century of Spock and Captain Kirk, but the stories get better (and more genuinely science fictional) as the book goes on. (If only some editor had weeded out the dangling modifiers—at one point, we are told Watson is about the size of a cocker spaniel.)

** Carole Nelson Douglas: *Castle Rouge,* Forge, $25.95. In a sequel to 2001's *Chapel Noir,* Holmes, Irene Adler, and various associates (including Bram Stoker and Nellie Bly) continue to search for Jack the Ripper across the map of Europe. Douglas's prose, dialogue, and research are tough to fault, and she offers a new and startling historical personage as Ripper candidate, but the repetitiousness and mid-serial nature of this bloated (500+-page!) enterprise will lose some readers. The few chapters narrated by Watson read well enough sentence to sentence, but the snail's pace and excessive detail are not the doctor's style at all. Holmes's ignorance and naiveté about the theater and prostitution are unconvincing.

** Alan Vanneman: *Sherlock Holmes and the Giant Rat of Sumatra,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $24. The tale of Giant Rat, one of the most famous of the untold cases, sounds like a science-fictional adventure story suited to Conan Doyle's other great protagonist, Professor Challenger, and that is what first novelist Vanneman delivers. The exotic travelogue has its moments but ultimately proves pretty silly. The amatory adventures of Watson, including a liaison with a married woman (!), strike a false note.

Most of the contributors to *Murder, My Dear Watson* (Carroll & Graf, $24), edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Jon Lellenberg, and Daniel Stashower, offer traditional pastiches, but in editor Stashower's humorous and cleverly plotted "The Adventure of the Agitated Actress," actor William Gillette is forced to turn sleuth during rehearsals for a British production of his play *Sherlock Holmes.*

Two for the reference shelf: The best historical-critical summary to date of the film and television versions of Holmes's cases, including productions from all languages, appears in Alan Barnes's superb *Sherlock Holmes on Screen* (Trafalgar Square, $24.95). Mark Campbell's *The Pocket Essential Sherlock Holmes* (Trafalgar Square, $6.95), provides in less than a hundred pages a story-by-story guide to the canon (including such contrarian critical assessments as pronouncing *The Hound of the Baskervilles* overrated), a short essay on parodies and pastiches, and a directory of the many actors who have impersonated Holmes.

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Art by Laurie Harden

REMODELING

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Outside Ada's bedroom window, the car's engine roared. No muffler. Her neighbors hadn't had a muffler for forty-five days now, not that she was counting.

Rick was.

Ada could sense him beside her, awake but pretending not to be, his entire body rigid as he listened to the *varoom-varoom* next-door. The bed, which had seemed so comfortable moments before, was a trap, the covers heavy and too hot, the pillow too soft.

Suddenly, there was silence. Merciful silence.

She could hear the *click-click* of the second hand on the old-fashioned alarm clock they used, and then—

Brakes squealed, followed by a final *varoom* as the car backed out of the driveway. Radio, heavy metal from the 1970s, turned on full. She could just make out Alice Cooper, or was it Kiss? The bass line always sounded the same.

Fifteen seconds between the first barrage of varooms and the second. Then the fading roar of the engine as it rounded the corner, gone for the next twelve hours.

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She didn't move. She knew if she moved, Rick would launch into his tirade. *Don't know why people don't respect each other. Don't they know they have neighbors?*

The second hand continued clicking—the sound too soft to be a tick—and she tried to calibrate her breathing to it, keeping it even. Forty-five days of the muffler. Then, before that, the eight-year-old's new drum set. Or had that been at the previous house?

They were all blurring together.

She didn't dare confess that. Twenty-one years of tirades, and nineteen new homes. First, apartments with paper-thin walls. She'd understood the tirade then. She hadn't liked the thump-thump-*oh, honey, oh!*s any more than Rick had. Or the fights coming from the other apartment. Or the constantly ringing phone from the apartment below.

The townhouse had been slightly better. Only a few shared walls there, and not important ones—laundry room, closets. There, the problem had been the communal deck, the smell of charcoal wafting through the window.

Outside the bedroom window, a child shouted, then laughed. Another child answered, shrill. More laughter.

Rick's tension grew. Ada wasn't sure if she should continue to pretend to sleep or if she should get up and head for the shower. Because the next sound from below would be a loud conversation about all those things children cared about and no one else did, followed by the sigh of bus brakes and the wheeze of exhaust.

Ada threw the covers back. Rick jumped. He clearly hadn't realized she was awake. She smiled at him, hoping to fend off the tirade, then swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Do you hear that?" he asked.

Her right foot found the shag carpet that they couldn't afford to replace.

"I've half a mind to write to the city and demand they do something about that bus stop. Can't they stop the damn thing at an intersection? Does it . . ."

Ada leaned backwards, put a gentle finger on his lips, and then kissed him, more to shut him up than to start anything. He wouldn't

Under her mystery pseudonym Kris Nelscott, Kristine Kathryn Rusch has been getting lots of good press recently. Her series featuring African-American P.I. Smokey Dalton debuted with *A Dangerous Road,* which won the Herodotus Award for Best Historical Mystery and was nominated for an Edgar Award. The most recent series entry, *Thin Walls* (St. Martin's / September 2002), received a starred review in *PW*. Ms. Rusch also has a new story collection: *The Retrieval Artist* (Five Star). †

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be interested anyway. He was already too tense.

"I'm going to the shower," she said. "Care to join me?"

He threw his own covers back. "I'll put on coffee. Maybe it's quieter in the kitchen."

But Ada knew it wouldn't be. It never was.

Rick had a meeting downtown with the accountant. For the first time in weeks, Ada had no morning appointments and could take her time to get to the shop. Usually she left at nine A.M. sharp, either to meet with clients or to talk to the stores that recommended her interior decorating skills.

She took her coffee into the home office. It was on the tree side of their property. Spruce, maples, a few oaks. Through the window, it looked like they lived in a forest. The walls were thick—a bathroom and their bedroom between the nearest wall and the street.

She wanted to put their bed in here, but Rick had overruled her. He needed silence when he worked more than he needed anything else. And since he handled the books, the promotion, and all the other little details of her interior design business, he got what he wanted.

The doorbell rang, making her jump. No one rang the bell. No one came to the door, not even the mailman, who left all their packages in the large mailbox at the foot of the driveway.

Ada pressed a hand to her heart. It was racing. She made herself get up and head downstairs, wondering what had gone wrong this time.

She was nearly to the living room when the doorbell rang again.

"Coming!" she yelled.

She arrived at the front door slightly breathless, and pulled it open without looking through the spyhole Rick had put in.

A balding man with a football player's neck and a sagging belly stood on her stoop. He looked familiar, but it took her a moment to place him.

Muffler Man, the neighbor. Ada had only seen him through a window, from a distance, or inside his car. She hadn't realized how solid he was up close.

"Your husband in?" Muffler Man asked, and there was nothing friendly in his tone.

For a moment, she debated lying to him, but she didn't know what that would gain her. He would know soon enough that Rick wasn't here.

"He'll be back soon," she said. "You want me to let him know you called?"

Muffler Man stared at her as if she had spoken Swahili. His gaze moved up and down her face, then his eyes narrowed. "You give him a message for me."

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"Sure," she said.

"You tell him I know what he's doing. He's not going to drive me outta here. You tell him I seen the pattern, and I know the truth."

Her heart hadn't stopped pounding. "The truth about what?"

"You just tell him," he said, and stalked off her porch.

She stood at the door and watched him cross the yard, his boots leaving deep prints in the moist spring grass. His shoulders were broad, his arms thick and muscular.

Ada debated going after him, but she didn't. She didn't like confronting angry men. Fortunately, she didn't have to do it often. Most of her interior design work was for female clients, and Rick rarely lost his temper. He just complained a lot.

Muffler Man didn't sound like a complainer. He seemed like more trouble than that.

Ada closed the door, then locked it. After a moment, she went to the back door and locked it, too. Then she sat down at the kitchen table—butcher-block, bought for their fourth house, where it had looked lovely in the dining area—and shook.

Those were threats. Vague threats. The kind you couldn't call the police over because you couldn't exactly say what was menacing about the conversation.

She picked up the phone, started to dial Rick's cell, then hung up. She didn't need to interrupt his meeting with the accountant. Rick would find out soon enough.

And he wouldn't be happy. He already hated these neighbors for their children and their pets and their refusal to buy a muffler. He didn't need another reason to watch their house from the spare bedroom, to make a log of all their transgressions, to complain about the muffler every morning when he woke up.

Maybe she wouldn't tell him. Maybe she would just let it slide, as she'd let so many other things slide for so many years. Maybe she'd pretend that it hadn't happened at all.

The meeting with the accountant went well. The business was finally turning a profit, even with their salaries taken out every two weeks. Rick took Ada out to celebrate, and in the excitement she forgot about Muffler Man.

She didn't think about him at all until the following morning, at seven-fifteen sharp. She could count the *varoom-varooms*, then almost predict the moment of squealing brakes as he backed to the edge of his driveway. Such a ritual, followed by the crank of heavy-metal music—Metallica this time—and the final varooming "screw you" as the car drove away.

"No bus this morning," Rick said, startling her. "Is it a holiday?"

Ada shrugged, surprised that she hadn't noticed the lack of sounds. "It's just Thursday."

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"Probably some stupid in-service day." He sighed and rolled out of bed. "Means there'll be screaming and shouting in the yard, or the basketball slamming against the building all afternoon. How can someone who can't afford to buy his kids video games afford a house, anyway?"

And with that, Rick padded to the bathroom, totally naked. He had love handles just above his hips. She hadn't noticed that before. When was the last time she had really looked at him?

It worried her that she couldn't remember.

The shop was quiet except for the mellow strains of a Mozart piano concerto. Outside, the rain whipped in the wind, making puddles on the city's streets deep enough to clog drains. Good thing Ada already had her materials in the car. She wouldn't want to take them outside in this weather.

She was looking forward to this afternoon's job. She loved the early parts in the process: assessing the house, letting the customer start dreaming about the way her home would look when Ada finished. Most people didn't know how new tile changed the feeling of a kitchen or how a single horizontal strip of wallpaper brought a bedroom's details together.

Ada knew, though, and could explain clearly. People trusted her, said she made them visualize the changes long before they happened.

Sometimes, she thought if she had remained single, she would be rich by now.

She made herself shake off the thought. If she had remained single, if they hadn't moved, if they hadn't lost all their equity in the quick sale of the house on Dover—all things that couldn't be changed. People never got do-overs. A life couldn't be remodeled the way a house could.

Ada sipped the last of her afternoon cup of Darjeeling, then opened the finances file on the computer. She had to print out a final invoice for Mr. Goldstein. She'd drop it off on the way to this afternoon's appointment.

The financial file looked different. Rick always set the computer on "icons" rather than "list" the way she preferred it. He must have stopped in the office after he saw the accountant and updated the files on site. Usually he updated files from home, using the computer network they had spent a fortune to set up six years ago. Now their systems were out of date, and they couldn't afford a new one.

She pulled down her View options from the toolbar, made the change, and watched as the icons became a table of contents for the file. She scanned, looking for the Goldstein account and not finding it. In fact, this file looked different somehow. She saw Urbanick, a name she didn't recognize. She frowned, wondering if

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Urbanick had been a consult she had forgotten about, and clicked open the file.

This file contained additional files: URCredithist, URMortg, UREmploy, URPersonal, and more, scrolling all the way to the bottom of the open window.

Had Rick gotten the accountant's files by mistake? That didn't make any sense. Even if Rick had, he wouldn't have copied them to the hard drive. He would have simply put the disk in his briefcase and taken it back to the accountant the next afternoon.

Wouldn't he?

She clicked open URCredithist, and found credit reports. She glanced at one, felt as she would peeping into someone's bedroom, and was about to close the file when the top line caught her eye:

Charles Urbanick
1325 SW Oak

Her breath caught. Her address was 1323 SW Oak. Urbanick must have been Muffler Man's real name. What was Rick doing, investigating the neighbor's personal history? Looking for a way to get them to move?

She clicked back to the original window, saw that Rick had, indeed, downloaded these files the day before, along with the rest of the financial files.

The phone rang, and she looked guiltily at the clock on the computer's desktop. She wasn't late for her appointment yet, but she would be if she continued to explore these files.

She picked up the phone and found herself talking to a potential new client. While she went through the familiar spiel, she found a floppy, downloaded the strange files, and then closed them. She labeled the disk 1996, knowing that Rick would have no reason to investigate something that old, and then slipped it into the pile of backups they kept in the shop's supply room.

By the time she had finished with the call, she had tidied up her desk, printed the invoice, and grabbed her purse. She was ready for her consultation.

But her enthusiasm for the new job was gone. Instead, she found herself worrying about the mystery files, her stomach so acidic that she had to take five Tums before it settled down.

For the third night in less than a week, Rick asked her to bring home pizza. Lately, she'd been doing a lot of the cooking after she got in, or she brought home takeout.

She had understood it when he was cramming, preparing the financials for the accountant. But that meeting was past. Rick should have had more than enough time to make something quick

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and healthy.

She'd meant to say something when she came in, but Rick hadn't been anywhere around. She had had to put the pizza in the oven, and then she'd had to track him down when it was warm.

He had hidden himself in their office, huddled over the computer's keyboard as if it held the secrets of the universe. She came into the room just far enough to see what he was doing and started. He was manipulating numbers in the Quicken program, using its mortgage calculator.

Her stomachache returned. "Are we going to move again?" she blurted before she had a chance to stop herself.

Rick whirled to face her. "Ada. I didn't realize you were home."

"I called for you. I put in the pizza. It's done. Can't you smell it?"

"Now I can." He smiled.

"Are we moving?" she repeated, not willing to let this go.

"No." His neck was flushed. She had embarrassed him, but she wasn't sure how. "The news last night said prime was going down again. I was recalculating to see if new rates would benefit us."

"Just because prime goes down doesn't mean mortgage rates will." She couldn't believe she was lecturing him on money. He had always been the financial brains in the family.

"I know, honey, but it usually follows. So I figured, why not?" He flicked a couple of keys and the file closed. Then the screen went dark. "You said dinner's ready?"

"I said the pizza was done." She knew she sounded bitchy, but she didn't care. He was lying to her. He was planning another move. He'd had enough of the revving car, the school bus, the neighbors next-door.

Ada studied him, actually seeing him for the first time in years. The dark good looks were gone. Crow's-feet and a mouth down-turned from constant disappointment had given his face a pinched look. His eyes, once his best feature, now seemed small.

"Ada?" Rick said, with an emphasis that let her know he was repeating himself. "Everything okay?"

She didn't want to answer that.

"Let's eat," she said, and headed downstairs to the hideous orange kitchen. Then she leaned on the countertop, wondering how she had gotten to this place. Was her face as pinched as Rick's? She was afraid to go to the mirror and find out.

The next day, Ada had a client lunch at the city's newest upscale restaurant. She parked in the nearby lot, pulled up her hood against the seemingly endless rain, and stepped gingerly across puddles covering the pavement.

Suddenly a hand grabbed her arm. She turned, startled, and saw Muffler Man.

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"You didn't tell him, did you?" His grip was so tight that it hurt.

"Let me go." She tried not to sound panicked, but her heart was racing.

"I told you to give him my message. Maybe he didn't need it. Maybe you're the problem."

"Let me go," she said, trying to back away.

"I'm not kidding, lady," he said. "I am really tired of all of this, and I'm giving him one more chance to quit."

"I'm giving you one more chance to let me go before I scream for help," she said as forcefully as she could.

He looked at his hand as if it had operated without his permission. Then he released her.

She ran for the restaurant, dodging traffic as she hurried across the street. Once, she glanced over her shoulder, but he wasn't following her. He was just watching.

When she got inside, she stopped and stared out the window. Hands touched her shoulder, and she jumped. She turned to see the maître d' trying to help her remove her coat.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked. "You want me to call the police?"

She looked out the window again. Muffler Man was gone.

"No," she said. "I'll be all right."

But she was lying. She wouldn't be all right. Her arm ached, and she was scared.

This time, she would have to tell Rick.

"The minute it happened," Rick said, "you should have called me."

"I had an important lunch." Ada ran a hand through her hair. She hadn't called him because she didn't want him to interfere with her life, her work, any more than he already had. She had waited until she had finished for the day, and even then, she had driven home instead of picking up the phone.

They were in the bedroom. Rick stood in front of the window, looking down. Their neighbor's house was empty. Usually no one arrived home until seven.

"Was he following you?"

"I don't know," she said, and she didn't. She had no idea why Muffler Man had been in that parking lot.

"Well, is he stalking you? You said this happened before."

"Here," she said. "He came here. He was looking for you."

"So he said." Rick leaned his forehead against the glass. His biceps bunched as he clenched and unclenched his fists.

"I believe him," Ada said.

"You'd believe anyone."

Ada flinched. Did Rick really think so little of her, or was he lashing out in his anger at their neighbor?

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"He said you had to stop—"

"I know what he said." Rick moved away from the window. "I'm not doing anything. I've even stopped complaining. Maybe he thinks he can harass us like he thinks I'm harassing them."

Rick paced to the bed, to the door, then to the window again, looking out as if he were checking to see if the neighbors had come home in the few seconds he was gone.

"It's too late to call the police." He pressed a fist against the frame. "You should have told me right away."

"It's not too late," Ada said. "The maître d' saw everything. They'd know we weren't making it up."

"And they'd wonder why you waited until now."

"We tell them the truth—you told me to call."

Rick shook his head. "Won't do any good now. They'd have to catch him in the act, or near the act. Maybe I'll have a talk with him."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Ada said, remembering how angry the man had been.

"It doesn't matter what you think," Rick snapped. "You screwed this up enough. I'll handle it from here."

And with that, the conversation was closed.

Ada put a hand over her distressed stomach and made her way down the stairs to watch something mindless on television. Anything to keep her distracted.

Maybe she should ignore his request this time. Just because his mind was made up didn't mean she had to live with it. She could talk to the neighbor—after all, he'd been approaching her. She could find out what had him so upset, and maybe she could change it.

Maybe. All she knew was she had to try.

The neighbors got home at seven-thirty, their arrival heralded by a basketball hitting the side of Ada's house. She expected Rick to speed down the stairs and launch himself out the door, but he remained in the office, working on his computer. He seemed so involved that, for a moment, she thought of going to Muffler Man's then.

But she didn't. She wanted no chance of being caught. No chance at all.

The next day, she planned to visit the house at lunch—the wife was often home then, and Ada thought she might be easier to talk to—but the sheriff changed her plans.

He arrived at seven A.M., the flashing lights from his squad car sending pale blue and red squares across the bedroom ceiling. His pounding woke Ada up, but Rick was already awake. He was standing near the window, his body turned toward the side so that

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no one looking up could see in.

Voices rose below: Muffler Man's deep and indignant, swearing he'd made payments and had checks as proof; the wife's shrill and sharp, demanding that the sheriff wait for their lawyer; and the sheriff himself, claiming the problem was not his.

Ada thought Rick would be angry at the noise, at the interruption of his morning ritual, but he wasn't. He was bobbing on the soles of his feet, his hastily donned gym shorts leaving nothing to the imagination, an expression of satisfaction on his face.

Ada grabbed her robe just as the *beep-beep-beep* of a truck in reverse echoed throughout the neighborhood and then she walked to the window which, to her surprise, was open. Rick never left the window open, claiming it let in too much noise.

"Not so close," he hissed as she approached.

But she ignored him, facing the window head-on. A tow truck had latched onto the rear axle of the muscle car and was dragging it onto the street. The sheriff was supervising the truck. A deputy stood near the house's door so that no one would interfere.

The rest of the neighborhood watched, from their doorways and windows. The children sat on the stoop as if their world had ended, and the wife was nowhere to be seen.

Muffler Man stood in the middle of the lawn, another deputy beside him. His fists pushed against his hips, and he looked more like a linebacker than ever.

He also seemed to know that Ada had reached the window. His gaze met hers and his lips moved. Even though she couldn't understand what he was mouthing, she knew it had to be a threat.

"Serves them right," Rick whispered. "Someone must have complained about the noise."

"The sheriff doesn't seize a vehicle because of noise," Ada said.

"If it's nonpayment, maybe they'll move." Rick continued to whisper. "Or get evicted."

"It takes years to get evicted from your own house," Ada said.

The tow truck dragged the car down the center of the block. The school bus stopped at the corner, waiting for the tow truck to go by.

"We didn't even get any warning notices," Muffler Man said to the deputy, but his gaze was still on Ada. She backed away from the window.

"It's not our problem, sir," the deputy said. "You'll have to contact your creditors."

Rick was smiling. Ada pulled the window closed. "You shouldn't be so happy about someone else's misfortune."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer family," Rick said, and headed to the shower.

She was shaking. The files haunted her. The credit history, the

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personal files. Had Rick done something to get the car repossessed?

He couldn't have. Muffler Man had to be lying, trying to cover up for failing to make his car payments.

The children were still sitting on their stoop, even though the bus had stopped at its usual place near the driveway. Muffler Man shook himself, as if waking from a nightmare, and walked to his children.

"It'll be all right," he said, his voice now muffled by the glass. "We'll have this settled by the time you get home."

Ada clutched her robe tightly. Instead of crawling back in bed to wait for the shower, she went downstairs to make herself breakfast.

The ugly orange kitchen looked even brighter in the early morning sunlight. Her plants, in the extended window over the sink, liked the strange light, but they were the only ones. Ada started the coffeemaker, then stirred some batter for waffles. Rick liked waffles and so did she, when she had time for them.

The shower continued its hum, echoing through the pipes. She stirred, and stared out the back window at what passed for their lawn.

Here she couldn't hear the neighbors fight or the squeal of the bus wheels. Even with the radio off, all she heard was the scrape-scrape-scrape of her wooden spoon in the bowl, and the chirping of some tiny morning birds as they ate the seeds she'd left on her back porch.

A pounding on the front door so startled her that she almost dropped the bowl of batter. The pounding continued, hard and furious, and she knew without looking who was there.

She set the bowl of batter on the counter, and thought about getting Rick from the shower, but that would only make matters worse. Rick would gloat and Muffler Man, already unreasonable from his misfortunes, might respond violently.

She shoved aside a week's worth of papers and mail on the far counter, searching for the mobile phone.

More pounding. She wanted to yell at Muffler Man to stop, but she didn't. She didn't want him to think of her in here alone. But the moment the shower shut off, Rick would be down here, yelling at her for not answering the door, and then laughing at Muffler Man for being such a fool.

Her hand closed on the mobile phone. She picked it up, shaking, and pressed it on. The dial tone sounded loud in the kitchen.

The pounding had stopped. She let out a small sigh and hung up, relieved she wouldn't have to call after all. She didn't want to make things worse.

Then the front door banged open. Muffler Man stood there,

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dwarfing the frame, a key in his right hand and a look of triumph on his florid face.

"Only idiots leave an extra key above the mantel," he said.

She pressed the phone on, dialed 9-1-1 with her thumb. He crossed the living room in two strides, entered the breakfast nook, then the kitchen, and yanked the phone out of her hand before it rang once.

Muffler Man shut the phone off, then flung it across the room. "Where is he?"

She shook her head, moving backwards, feeling naked in her robe.

"Don't play innocent, you bitch. You people are destroying my life."

He backed her against the counter. She could reach the full, hot pot of coffee, and the knives beside the sink, but she wasn't sure she was fast enough to use them as weapons without him turning them against her.

"We haven't done anything," she said. The sound of the shower still hummed down the pipes. Rick was oblivious.

"Haven't done anything," Muffler Man mocked. He was so close now that his belly brushed against her robe. "We never got any right-to-cure notices. We never even got late-payment notices. And my wife looked—she has a record of when she made payments on-line. I don't know how you did it, but you made it so they thought we didn't make any payments. And she's checking now to see if you've been doing the same for the house."

"I don't know why you think we'd do something like that." Ada's mouth was dry. She thought of the files, hoping that her knowledge wouldn't show on her face. She tried to move sideways, down the counter, but Muffler Man put an arm beside her, blocking her.

"Don't you?" His eyes narrowed. "Your husband is the one who's been complaining all the time. Too much noise. You know, I've been checking this out. He always complains about noise."

"Get away from me," she said. "This is my house. You have no right to be here."

"There are more complaints on file under his name in this city than for anyone else, you know that? And when we moved next-door, he started in on us. We're not doing anything wrong, lady. We don't make a lot of noise. Your husband's just sick."

"Please," she said again. She couldn't stand having him this close. "Go away."

Muffler Man leaned even closer, his eyes bulging out. She reached for the coffee pot, but he grabbed her arm. His fingers dug into her flesh, pinching the nerve endings against the bone. She cried out, then bit her lip, not wanting Rick to hear.

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Somehow she knew it would be worse if Rick overheard.

She twisted, trying to get away, but Muffler Man's grip tightened even more. Their gazes met for a moment, and in his she saw a fury so deep that it terrified her.

Then, without even thinking, she brought her knee up and slammed it into his groin.

He yelped with pain, let go of her arm, and doubled over, clasping his hands over his balls. She whirled, grabbed a large flowerpot, and smashed it on the top of his head.

The pot shattered. He staggered and fell, thumping against the floor so hard the house shook.

Upstairs, the shower shut off.

"Ada?" Rick's voice sounded far away and worried.

Muffler Man scuttled backwards, blood and dirt running down his face. He managed to rise and totter out the open front door.

"Ada?" Rick's voice was closer now.

She tightened the belt on her robe, felt her hands slip on the flannel, and looked down and saw her fingers were covered in filth. She stepped gingerly over the clay shards, bits of dirt sliding beneath her toes.

The dirt didn't show up on the shag carpet, but the blood did—a little trail of it, leading to the front door.

She followed the blood as if it were breadcrumbs and when she reached the door, she slammed it shut, bolted it, and rested her forehead against it.

Outside, she thought she heard the faint wail of sirens.

"Ada?" Rick was behind her. She could smell the faint scent of Ivory soap. She turned.

He was wrapped in a towel, his chest hair still wet and matted, water dripping off his legs onto the dirt- and blood-covered carpet.

"Ada?"

He seemed hesitant, and she suddenly realized that he thought she had done this in some fit of anger, a psychotic break that hadn't surprised him at all.

"It was the Muffler Man," she said, and slowly sank to the floor.

The police arrived less than five minutes later. It seemed that a 911 operator was supposed to scan all phone numbers that came into the center, even if no one was on the other line. Then the operator tried to call back. If she got no answer, she dispatched a squad car.

Muffler Man had broken Ada's phone. She couldn't have answered, even if she'd wanted to.

Rick insisted that Ada press charges, and the police officers agreed. Ada had protested weakly that pressing charges might make the situation worse, but no one listened to her.

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The officers arrested Muffler Man.

Ada felt no safer.

Rick wanted Ada to stay home, but she had to get out. She didn't want to rehash the morning's events. She wanted to be alone.

The shop was quiet. She kept the Closed sign up and the door locked. Instead of working out front as she usually did, she worked in the tiny supply room.

She hated the supply room. The fluorescents washed out color and made everything seem slightly dirty. When she examined fabric and paint swatches, she did so in the front, by the large windows that let in a great deal of natural light.

But she felt like hiding after that morning. Her hands were still shaking—and her mind wouldn't quit racing.

She didn't want to believe Muffler Man; she hated him for what he had done that morning, for the fear he'd made her feel. But hatred was such an easy emotion. She'd seen Rick succumb to it over and over again, and his hatred prevented him from seeing the complexities around him.

She'd been able to see those complexities. She could see them now.

Like Muffler Man's kindness to his children, the way he would hug them when he came home from work, the fact that he never raised his voice to them or to his wife. He never even lost his temper—until he had come to Ada's door just a few days ago.

Ada went out front, dug through her desk, and found the bottle of Tums. It was nearly empty.

She made herself chew two—the chalky cherry taste uncomfortably familiar—and then grabbed the disk she had labeled 1996. For a moment she stared at it, black and innocent in the palm of her hand. Then she closed her fingers around it and carried it to the laptop she'd set up in the back.

If she were being honest with herself—and she was, at least today—this was the reason she had come to the shop. Not the fear she'd felt at home, not her anger at Rick for making the morning's attack about him instead of her, not even the horror she felt at the possibility the incident might happen again.

No, the reason she had come here was simple: She wanted to see if Muffler Man's accusations were correct.

She scooted a metal folding chair in front of the makeshift desk, put the disk into the laptop's drive, and called up the files.

She found a map to Charles Urbanick's life: his credit history; the public records of his home purchase, his marriage, and a previous divorce (amiable, by all accounts); newspaper articles on his success as a Little League coach; and so much more.

But the file that sent a chill through her had nothing to do with

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Urbanick's history. It had to do with his present.

In a folder marked "Plan A," Ada found a Quicken file for a savings account Rick had promised to close a year before. The account ledger had monthly transactions, several deposits of set amounts—$1,500, $400, and some smaller ones, all less than $100.

She cross-checked them with the Urbanick files, and then put her head in her hands.

The sums matched the Urbanicks' mortgage payment, their car payment, and all their credit-card payments. The repossessed car was only the beginning of their worries. Soon they'd lose their home and any credit rating they had.

Soon they would be out on the street, alone and without resources.

All because of Rick. He had been stealing from them, causing all their trouble, just like Urbanick said.

How long she sat in that back room with the pale fluorescent light, the uncomfortable chair, and the sleeping laptop screen, she did not know. Either the Tums had worked on the knot in her stomach or she had moved beyond the pain.

A hundred crazy thoughts ran through her head, all of them starting with the wish that she had let Charles Urbanick charge upstairs and take care of Rick. It would have been so simple—and she craved simple, because everything had suddenly become hard.

Or not so suddenly. She couldn't believe how she had deluded herself, thinking Rick was someone she could trust, someone she could love. Those mornings, listening to the car's muffler rev and hard rock blast through the windows, she had come to realize how much she had grown to dislike her husband and how unwilling she had been to acknowledge that.

Nineteen houses and a bright orange kitchen. Clients who were not allowed into her house because she couldn't afford to have the showplace that interior decorators usually had. Dreams set aside, forgotten, or lost.

And Rick's insistence on taking over the finances of her business, giving him the veneer of respectability—her respectability—to ruin even more lives.

The worst of it was, Ada had taught him this. In the early days of her business, she had shown him how to access credit files, how to use social security numbers to make certain a client was as solvent as they claimed to be, how to snoop into people's lives.

When they'd taken the house on Oak, Rick had said no one would force them to move again. Ada had thought he was going to change, to suck it up and live with the noises that had bothered him.

She hadn't expected him to strike back.

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Ada put her head in her hands. She couldn't ignore this anymore. She knew what she had to do.

She hadn't really thought that all those sudden moves, all that uprooting, always following Rick's whims, had merely been practice for this moment. But maybe she had been waiting for it—the chance to escape, to start fresh. Maybe she had known it was going to come all along—that at some point, her relationship with Rick would force her to lose everything she once cared for.

The problem was, she had lost everything a long time ago. She had only realized it now.

For the first time in years, she took action on her own initiative. She used the Internet to close all of her joint credit-card accounts. She had the bills sent to Rick. Her hands were shaking, but she didn't stop.

It took only a few clicks of the mouse to delete her name from all of the billing records for the home phone and the other utilities. She canceled her cell phone, effective the next morning, and she closed all the store's utility accounts. She drafted an e-mail letter to her current clients, recommending a rival interior decoration service, and set her e-mail program to mail the letter in the morning.

Changing that much of her life took less than an hour.

Then she called Gavin Markham, a client of hers who was also one of the best attorneys in town. She set an appointment with him for later in the afternoon, without explaining why she wanted to see him.

Finally, she made three copies of the 1996 disk. She put all three in her purse and stood.

Not much to take with her. Nothing really. Just the bank account information, her purse, and the laptop itself.

After she'd gathered her things, she closed and locked the door to her shop, refusing to let herself say goodbye. She hadn't really felt at home here, just as she hadn't felt at home in the orange kitchen or in the last five houses. When had she detached so thoroughly that she started skating through life, seeing nothing, having no dreams?

She wasn't sure she wanted to answer that question.

After she left the store, she moved as quickly as she could. First she went to her personal bank, and moved all but fifty dollars from the joint savings account into the joint checking account. Ten thousand, six hundred and eighty-five dollars, waiting to be used.

Then she took all but a hundred dollars from the joint account where Rick had been storing Urbanick's money. She left the hundred dollars so that no one would notify Rick that the account had been closed. She had the bank give her the rest in a money order, thousands of dollars taken from a family who had done nothing

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more than live their lives, without intending to bother a soul.

Finally, she went to the business's bank and closed her shop accounts effective on Friday—letting the bank know about the outstanding checks and making sure the bank would pay them.

The rest of the store's reserves she took in a personal money order, carefully folding it and setting it in her wallet.

Now her time was limited. Rick might try to use the accounts and he would figure out what she had done.

She had to be quick and she had to be smart.

Gavin Markham's office was as familiar as her own. The Chagall print she'd snared for him at an estate auction was the focal point of the room. His mahogany desk, off to the side, seemed like an afterthought. A wall of windows brought in filtered daylight, and the plants in front of them made the place comfortable despite the expensive trappings.

Markham met her in his shirt sleeves. Files stacked on top of his desk meant she'd interrupted him in the middle of preparing for a case.

"What's wrong, Ada?" he asked. "You sounded upset on the phone."

And from the way he was peering at her, she must have looked upset as well. Maybe she wasn't as calm as she was pretending to be.

She sat in the original Eames chair she had found at a flea market. Gavin sat on the edge of his desk, arms crossed. He clearly wasn't going to treat her the way he would treat a normal client.

He was treating her like a friend.

His kindness made her hands shake. She took a few deep breaths, then reached inside her purse, removing two of the 1996 disks, her wallet, and her checkbook.

She slid the disks to him and explained what she had found. Then she took out the money order she'd made from the Urbanicks' funds and handed it to Gavin.

"I want you to go to the police for me," she said, "and turn in Rick. Then I want you to return the Urbanicks' money, and contact their creditors. Everything is documented on this disk. I made one copy for you and another for the police."

Then, without looking up, so that she wouldn't have to see his reaction, she opened her checkbook and wrote him a check for ten thousand dollars. As she signed, she had an odd prescient flash: This would be the last time she would use her married name. In the future, she would have a new name, a made-up one, maybe, but one that would get her a fresh start somewhere else.

Her mouth was dry. She had loved Rick once. She wasn't sure what had happened to that love, but it had been part of her. It still

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was, like the memory of summer sunsets and the promise of a bright future if she only followed all the rules.

"Ada?" Gavin said.

She looked up. He was watching her with concern.

She handed him the check. "This is your retainer plus," she said. "Put it in some kind of account and take what you need for my case from it. I'll let you know where I'm going so that you can send me the monthly accounting. I'm sure this'll cost a lot, because I want you to start divorce proceedings, too—effective immediately."

Gavin opened his mouth as if he were going to speak, but she wouldn't let him. She wanted to get through this as quickly as possible.

"You'll need to cash the check this afternoon," she said. "I've taken it from our joint account, and I suspect that the moment Rick knows I'm gone, he'll try to empty the accounts himself. So please—"

"I will. I'll do everything you need." Gavin folded his hands across his lap. "You're planning to leave?"

She nodded. "I can't stay here. Not when it comes out."

"You'll be the person who stopped him," Gavin said.

Ada shook her head. "I'm the person who enabled him, all these years."

"You had no idea how far he was going to take his obsession," Gavin said.

"No," she said. "But I should have."

Gavin promised to handle her case, to make certain the police did not charge her when they went after Rick, and to make certain the Urbanicks' financial reputation was restored. Gavin had her sign an official form, asking that the charges against Urbanick be dropped.

Ada left his office, knowing she had done everything she could.

When she reached the elevator banks, her cell phone started to ring. For a moment, she debated whether or not to answer, then pulled the phone out of her purse.

She answered as she got onto the elevator, riding it down to the parking garage.

"Ada?" Rick sounded panicked. "There's something wrong with our account."

Her heart pounded. "Our account?"

"The business account. I was going to move some funds—"

"You were going to move funds?" she blurted, the anger she'd been repressing all day slipping past her defenses. "What for?"

"That doesn't matter, babe," he said, just as he always had in cases like this. "What matters is that the bank tells me we're short. You know anything about this?"

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A lot, she wanted to say. But she had to remain silent. She didn't want to tip Rick off. Gavin needed time to get the police involved.

"No." She hoped the anger now sounded like panic. "You want me to go to the bank and check?"

"Could you?" Rick asked. "I've got a few things to do here."

As if she were at his beck and call, as if the business she had just closed—the dreams she had just abandoned—were his and not hers.

"I'll check," she said, and hung up. She was shaking. He had no reason to move money from the business account.

But there had been a lot less in it than she had thought there should be, and their savings had seemed low, too. Her fault, for leaving the money in his hands. Her fault for trusting him.

From now on, she would trust only herself.

She reached her car, got in, and leaned against the steering wheel. She wasn't sure she was strong enough to continue. It would be so much easier to go home and let the events fall where they might.

But she had already started the ball rolling. And if she stayed, she would be blamed as much as Rick. Who would believe, in this day and age, that a businesswoman had closed her eyes to everything financial, had let a man ruin her life—and so many others—so effortlessly?

People would say that anyway, but she wouldn't be around to hear it. And she would do her best to make restitution, returning to testify if she needed to.

She took a deep breath and realized that the shaking had stopped.

Progress. She was making a lot of progress.

She started the car and drove out of the parking garage. Her last stop was nearby, and then she was done.

One afternoon's worth of work, and her life would be different forever.

Ada sold her car—their car—to a used-car dealer for a fistful of cash. She toyed with getting a new one, one that would be completely hers, but she didn't want to put herself in any kind of debt, not when her future was so uncertain.

She wasn't even sure she would go back to interior decorating. She might take a new job in her new home—wherever that would be. She was getting tired of improving the appearance of things without solving the problems underneath.

After she finished at the car dealership, she took a bus to the train station and bought a ticket with cash. She didn't know how long it would take Rick to be arrested, and she didn't want him to trace her.

For a while, she wanted to be completely on her own.

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When they started calling her train, she grabbed her purse and her laptop and headed for the tracks. Halfway there, she stopped. She rummaged inside her purse for her cell phone and studied it for a moment.

It was her last link. More than the wedding ring she still wore on her left hand, it was the thing that bound her to Rick. Conversations she didn't want, irritations she didn't need, requests that were so inappropriate, she couldn't believe he'd made them—or that she'd listened.

She threw the phone into a nearby trash bin and boarded the train, feeling lighter than she had in years.

Her ticket was coach, but she had the double seat to herself. As she stretched out on it, trying to keep her legs covered with the blanket she bought in the snack bar, she planned her next move.

She'd get off the train at the first interesting stop. Maybe she'd stay there, maybe she wouldn't. She'd look around, though, and see if she liked what she saw.

Once she found a suitable home, she'd use the last of her business funds to rent a place, get a job, and figure out how to live her life with her eyes open instead of closed.

She'd keep expenses low. She'd still need money to send back to Gavin. She had a hunch the divorce would be complicated, and she wasn't sure how the Urbanicks would react to her admission of what Rick had done.

It wouldn't surprise her if they sued. She had to be prepared for everything, and she would face it all when the time came.

So would Rick. A jury was going to send him to the home he deserved—a place filled with nasty neighbors, constant noise, and lights that burned long into the endless prison night.

And there would be nothing he could do about any of it.

He wouldn't even be able to move away.

Ada sighed. She was the one who was moving. For the very last time. She would find a place she liked and stay there until she was an old woman.

She would become a fixture in her neighborhood, a friendly woman who tolerated her neighbors' idiosyncrasies the way they tolerated hers.

Voices echoed in the darkness behind her, and a conductor came by, checking on passengers in the middle of the night. Ada closed her eyes and listened to the *clack-clack* of the train moving along the track, the wail of a baby three rows back, and the short grunting snores of a man across the aisle.

The sound of people living their lives.

Enjoying their lives.

Just like she planned to enjoy hers. ●

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STATELY HOMES AND THE INVISIBLE GIANT

by Arthur Porges

No one is totally immune to the more subtle effects of ageing. Not even my old friend and—I must say it, although we Sikhs are fiercely independent—patron, Stately Homes (of England).

He was still quite strong and vigorous, despite tending towards long periods of indolence and rarely exercising. His amazing mind, too, was keen as ever, much like the marvelous Analytical Engine of Charles Babbage, which he greatly admired, if a bit less so having learned that the infamous Professor Moriarty had a hand in the inventor's mathematical logic.

In the case of Homes, what I noted was a significant increase in testiness and impatience. His need for really puzzling crimes got ever stronger; he was no longer content with reflection, and on several occasions, I'm ashamed to admit, I actually hid his violin under our divan. He would search for it rather aimlessly, but then give up, lie back in the armchair, and brood.

So I was relieved, not a typical reaction for me, to hear the clangorous voice of Inspector Briggs Gerard, our old friend from the Yard, expostulating with our invaluable Swedish landlady, Mrs. Hutsut, below stairs. I had no doubt he was bringing Homes another baffling case he himself could not solve.

When he had been escorted in and was seated with a small

This is not the first time Arthur Porges has provided a delightful parody for the yearly issue in which we join the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, in honoring history's most popular detective. On Twelfth Night, the day they assert is Holmes's birthday, the BSI will hold its annual dinner in New York. Members of the organization claim that Holmes is living in retirement in Sussex, England. Certainly he lives on in the minds of writers and readers. ¶

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brandy in hand, the inspector got right to the matter that concerned him.

"When a rich, important man, a public figure, is brutally killed, you wouldn't believe the kind of pressure we get from the Home Office, gentlemen." His face dark, he took a sip of the liquor. "We're near getting to the bottom of the case, but then I thought, 'This is just the kind of bizarre affair Mr. Homes relishes, so why not do him a sort of favor—for old times, you might say—and give him something to try his theories on.' Sometimes, I admit," he added, "they do make a bit of sense out of messy circumstances."

On hearing this, Homes, to my delight, was instantly transformed. His eyes, which of late had seemed sunken and hooded, sparkled, and his face, so long sober, became greatly animated.

"You heard the man, Sun Wat!" he exulted. "At last a break in the damned dullness of a crime-free London. The game is afoot! Let's have all the facts, Gerard. Who's been killed?"

"None other than Sir Nigel Loring, the industrialist, one of the wealthiest men in all England."

"Ah," Homes said. "The one they call Loring the Lecher. One very much for the ladies, it's said."

"True enough, I'm sorry to say. Very bad for public morality, too."

"And who inherits all those lovely Consols shares?"

"Wrong turn, Mr. Homes," Gerard said, not unhappily, I noted. It wasn't the first time, I thought, that he got some pleasure thinking that my friend might also be baffled, if only briefly. Even an unsolved murder might not be too high a price to pay for that satisfaction, but perhaps I'm too hard on the estimable inspector.

"No, it ain't that," the inspector said smugly. "As you may know, his wife died many years ago. Childless; just a few second cousins and such abroad. He left all his money, and even the big house—Elizabethan, they tell me—to the Tottering-on-the-Brink Hunt Club. He doted on the sport."

"Enough motive to murder right there," Homes said, his lips twitching. It was good to see him alive again, so to speak. "How was Loring killed?"

"Unusual weapon, you might say. A bronze statue, three feet tall, and very heavy, weighing over eight stone. I'm pretty strong, played a lot of football in my day, yet I could never lift and swing that at a man's head. The murderer must have been a giant."

"Statue, eh? Of what?"

"Neptune, I'm told. Taming a seahorse."

Homes lifted an eyebrow, and a tiny smile touched his mouth.

"Elementary—Robert Browning did it."

Then, noting our blank stares, he said, "I see you don't read our best poet. Well, in a recent poem, he refers to just such a figurine, cast in bronze by Claus of Innsbruck."

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"Wrong again," the inspector said with barely concealed glee. "It was signed on the bottom by a bloke named Jacob Epstein—and he didn't do it, either; he's holed-up in France."

Homes ignored the jibe, saying, "I didn't think that Young Turk, Epstein, ever did anything as traditional as a Roman God. Last I heard, he was much farther back to Adam, and causing quite a stir."

"One of my constables, an artsy-craftsy type, did say Epstein is a bit hairy at the heel."

"Well, as you yourself would say, this isn't getting us any forrader. Sun Wat, get me the timetable; we shall have to pay a visit to Loring Hall and take a look."

When Homes had scanned the timetable, he said, "I fancy the one-ten will do us nicely. By the way, Gerard, have you questioned the servants?"

"Only two around," was the reply. "All the inside people were let off to attend the big Ludlow fair. That left only the gardener's dogsbody, a slow-witted lad named Rodney Stone, and the gamekeeper, Micah Clarke."

Here, noting that Gerard's glass was empty, Homes handed him the carafe, which was accepted with enthusiasm.

"What do you have on motive?" Homes asked him.

"Lummy," the inspector said. "Half the county would have liked to do Loring in, but especially the lower classes. He was a devil with their young women. That's why we first closed in on the gamekeeper. He was betrothed to the downstairs maid, Sue Fone, and she ended up, some weeks ago, exiled to a small boarding-house miles away, carrying Loring's child, they say. Clarke, naturally, was furious."

"Then is he under arrest?"

"Unfortunately not. You see, he's small, almost a dwarf, barely five feet tall. Muscular enough and wiry, but we can't see him swinging that statue, not just once but repeatedly, as Sir Bernard Spilsbury testifies—and he don't make any mistakes."

"Agreed," Homes said. "Sir Bernard is a great pathologist."

"Well, there you have it. The assistant gardener was outside all afternoon, and didn't see any murderous giant go in. Only Clarke, who was in and out several times, to consult with Loring about poachers, he says. No way even to confirm that, since his master was alone, waiting for one of his lady-loves to come by for a little slap-and-tickle later that day, we're pretty sure."

"A fine puzzle," Homes said, rubbing his hands together. "Well, Sun Wat, if you'll go downstairs and find us a cab, we'll be off to the station. We can't do any more without a thorough examination of the scene, and, of course, the bronze figurine, which presents a most intriguing possibility."

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Naturally, I asked for an explanation of that last comment, but just as naturally, as I should have expected and saved my breath, he would say nothing more.

When we got to Loring Hall, a most impressive pile, Homes immediately went to the murder weapon, which was lying as found on the blood-spattered carpet. It, too, was stained. It was a very professional piece of sculpture, but Gerard scoffed that every seahorse he'd seen, always dead and dried on mantels, was tiny, and this one was huge, with great teeth and a flowing mane. Homes told him, with some amusement, that the bronze animal was mythical, unrelated to the little saltwater fishes.

Having made that clear, he stooped, and with obvious effort, strong as he is, righted the figurine and began to examine it with the aid of his magnifying glass.

"Observe the fine detail, gentlemen," he said. "A master sculpted this, probably by the 'lost wax' method." He then lifted it, frowned, and said, "I agree with you, Inspector. It would take a very powerful man indeed to wield this in a way to cause the fatal wounds." He was silent briefly, then said, "Perhaps you'll be kind enough to bring in the gardener. I have some questions to ask him." Gerard nodded, left, and returned with a tall, thin boy who tugged his forelock at us. He spoke with a very thick Scots brogue, hard to understand although Homes seemed to have no trouble.

"I tell ye again," the boy said. "Naebody, nae mon, nae bairn went intae tha hoose. Only Clarke, the gamekeeper."

Further questioning could not shake him, and he was not capable of serious deception, we all realized.

After that, the inspector brought us Micah Clarke. There was nothing stupid about him. Small, very alert, with bright blue eyes, he moved like one of James Fenimore Cooper's redskins, able to walk on dry leaves, I thought, without making a sound. He spoke slowly, calmly, quietly, with complete assurance. Only when Gerard brought up the matter of Sue Fone did his demeanor suddenly change. His blue eyes became cold and steely, and he said bitterly, "That was an evil act by Sir Nigel; a very evil act, and I cannot mourn his death." Homes seemed oddly indecisive, as if unwilling to press the man, but finally he asked about Clarke's repeated visits to the house.

"Sir Nigel was concerned about poachers," he said, a faint Lancashire accent in his voice. "He kept sending me out for evidence I'd been finding—you know, shell casings and such."

"The gardener mentioned your carrying packages each time," Homes said, a question in his words.

"Ah, yes. Well, yes. Those were evidence, the empty shells, some skins where the poachers had taken rabbits. Even grouse feathers."

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Homes gave him a sharp glance, then turned to Gerard and me. "I suggest we three have a conference outside." Then to Clarke, "Thank you, Micah; you may go, but please stay on the grounds. I may have more questions." The gamekeeper, his hatchet face expressionless, nodded.

Once we were outside in the garden, Homes looked around, apparently to make sure nobody was in earshot. But there was only the gardener, pruning some shrubs quite far away.

Satisfied, Homes said, his face dark, "What rubbish! I sense a high intelligence and great determination behind this crime, so why such a puerile story about poacher evidence? Poachers leave little or none, and certainly not several big parcels full. Gentlemen, there is a key point here that eludes me. I must have more data. Let's go back inside. I want to examine the carpet more thoroughly; the killer must have left his traces there."

In the musty parlor, Homes raised the blinds to let the full afternoon sunlight strike both the carpet and the figurine. He studied the bronze again, using his magnifying glass, then gave a little grunt, but before we could ask about what, if anything, he'd discovered, he dropped to all fours and began to scrutinize the rug, inch by inch. He reminded me, not for the first time, of a blooded hound on the spoor of a wily fox. Then suddenly he froze and delicately picked up something. He looked at it with his magnifying glass, and then arose, handing it to Gerard.

"What do you make of this, Inspector?"

Gerard studied, and smiled. "What do I make of it? Very likely to turn up around a dedicated grouse hunter, Mr. Homes. It's just a lead shot. Tells us nothing. Only a townie would be puzzled by it," he added with some malice.

But Homes's face was oddly bright. "By heaven," he cried, "all is becoming clear." He hurried to the bronze, magnifier in hand, scrutinized the back, and taking out his handkerchief, briskly rubbed it. "Aha! As I thought." He motioned to us, and we hurried to join him. "See that, the round patch about two inches in diameter?"

It was plain to see, but what could it mean? He caught the unspoken question, and smiled. "When I first examined the bronze, it was obvious that it had been cast in two parts. I could detect the seam. But it didn't occur to me then that the statue was originally hollow, the liquid metal having been poured, as is often done, over a heat-resistant core—firebrick or the like. This murder was devilishly well planned by a man thirsting for revenge."

He strode towards the sideboard muttering, "I'm sure I saw—ah, here it is," and returned with a large horn-handled hunting knife. With it, he began to jab strongly at the round patch, which quickly crumbled away to reveal a hole in the bronze. My friend thrust the point of the blade into it, then pulled the knife out to display a

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lead shot impaled on the tip.

"The final proof!" he exulted. "The clever devil—do you see how it was done?" Then, without waiting for a reply, which might have been slow in coming, since neither the inspector nor I had one, he said, "Clarke, determined to avenge Miss Fone, having noted the figurine, a perfect bludgeon, soon realized there was a way to clear suspicion from himself. How? By making the statue far too heavy for even a very strong man to swing repeatedly. From its heft, he inferred, rightly, that it must be hollow. Convinced of that, he killed Loring with a number of blows, then used a chisel to make a round opening in the back. Making frequent trips, which puzzled Stone but couldn't be avoided, he brought boxes of lead shot, which any gamekeeper would have in abundance what with all the grouse hunts, into the house, poured them into the figurine—only a few feet from his victim, mind you—and probably tamped them down so that no rattling sound would be heard if anybody moved the bronze, as indeed I did, you'll recall. After righting the now very heavy figurine, he made a makeshift patch of plaster of Paris or putty, and covered it with dust so that nobody not hunting for it would suspect anything. A brilliant job, I have to say, and one that he almost got away with."

I was deeply moved by this miracle of close reasoning, a masterpiece of deduction. This man will never age, I thought—how the devil does he do it?—and I combed my black beard with my fingers in a kind of agitation.

As for Inspector Gerard, he seemed dazed. He mumbled something I couldn't hear, then said almost to himself, "No demmed elusive giant, after all; lummy!" Then, "I must arrest Clarke; it's the hangman for him."

"I take no joy in that," Homes said somberly, "but there can be no excusing cold-blooded murder."

He gave me a long, strange stare. "Now I've a personal mystery to resolve."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Where the deuce is my violin?"

I had no reply, but could feel myself blushing. And I resolved then and there to suffer his playing with no more childish tricks. After all, there are worse sounds than my friend's discordant, ear-splitting solos—or are there? ●

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CONTRABAND

by Raymond Steiber

We close this issue with the last Raymond Steiber story submitted to *EQMM* prior to the author's death in 2000. Unless stories we have not yet seen should be discovered by his executors, this is, sadly, the last time we will be able to treat our readers to an original work by this talented purveyor of mystery, adventure, and intrigue. It is our hope that someday someone will bring out a collection of the best of the Steiber stories. ¶

Start with names. That's the best way.

Mine's Bill Riley, and I work for Blue Grass Investigations in Lexington, Kentucky. BGI is owned and operated by Lew Wallace—no relation to the guy that wrote *Ben-Hur*, but he'd certainly claim it if he thought about it.

BGI's just Lew, me, and a full-time secretary, and what with a couple of moonlighting cops, that's all we need. We do auto-insurance work mostly—hunting up witnesses, checking out claimant's stories—and since I-75, one of the most heavily trafficked roads in the country, runs right past our doorstep, we stay pretty busy.

What else do you need to know about me? This, I guess: About ten years ago I went deaf for a while. I'd been having trouble with a buzzing in my ears, and then overnight I completely lost my ability to hear. They put me in a school for the deaf where I learned to sign and read lips. In time, I had a couple of operations, and now, with the help of a hearing aid, I'm pretty close to normal.

The thing about losing my hearing is that it did two things for me. It introduced me to my wife Sarah, who's profoundly deaf, and it got me my job with BGI.

My wife first. At home I turn down my hearing aid so that we're on a more equal footing, and that's kept me up on my lipreading and signing. A couple of years ago I ran into Lew in a bar, and we got to b.s.ing. I bragged about my ability to lipread, and with the help of a couple of fellow barflies put on a demonstration for him. Lipreading's a real art, by the way. You only catch about half the

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words, and you have to put the rest together based on the context. And if somebody talks fast, you're liable not to pick up anything at all.

Right away, Lew, who's a degenerate gambler, dragged me off to another bar where he began making bets based on my ability. Not that he told anybody what I could do—that was the trick of it. Many drinks later, he proposed that I come to work for him. He said: "That lipreading stuff of yours could come in mighty handy in my line." Which it hasn't—until recently, that is, which is what this long preamble's been about: getting to the point where I can tell you about the contraband gang and how the bastards—and bastardette—almost made roadkill out of us.

Lew plopped the file down on my desk. He looks like a big old country boy, which is pretty much what he is—a briarhopper from the hills around Paris. That's Paris, Kentucky, not Paris, France.

I'm a Midwesterner myself, from Chillicothe, Ohio, which is an old Miami Indian name.

"What's this one about?" I asked.

"Margery Li. She tangled with a tractor-trailer just south of here, and she's no longer among the living."

"A tractor-trailer will do that to you—" I opened the file and looked at the pictures inside—"particularly if you're driving a little Honda Civic."

"This is a weird one, and her insurance company wants to snake its way out of any liability."

"Like all good snakes," I said.

"Hush. Those people pay our salaries."

"And then turn around and screw it back out of us with rate hikes."

Lew grinned his country-boy grin. "That's why I always ream 'em on expenses."

"So what's weird about this thing?"

Lew told me about the accident. It had happened about nine o'clock in the evening on I-75. Mrs. Li, an immigrant from Taiwan, had run her Honda into the back of the tractor-trailer. Since the tractor-trailor sat high and the Honda sat low, the roof of her car was crushed in, and her along with it. Then, driverless, the Honda had swung into the path of a Ford Focus and totaled it. There'd been a dog in Mrs. Li's car as well—a golden retriever—but it had come out of the wreck with nothing worse than a limp and a bad scare.

"When they finally pried her and the dog out of the car," Lew said, "she was still clutching a cell phone in her hand. What the State Patrol figures is that she was trying to punch in a number and didn't realize how fast she was overtaking the tractor-trailer."

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"Anybody hurt in the Focus?"

"A man and wife and their young child. Nothing fatal, but some pretty serious hospital time just the same."

"What about the tractor-trailer?"

"The driver didn't even notice anything had happened. You know what those big rigs are like. A mile long and twice as heavy. All he felt was a bump, so he kept on trucking. It wasn't till he pulled into a rest stop a couple of hours later that he spotted the damage."

"So where's the weird part?"

"That's a three-lane road at that point. The Honda was in the middle lane, the Ford Focus in the right lane, and there was another car about a hundred feet back in the left lane. The driver of *that* car claims he saw a big black SUV come up and kiss the Honda in the rear end just before it hit the truck. Or at any rate he *thinks* it was before the accident. The SUV sort of obstructed his view."

"Any black paint on the Honda?"

"Loads of it. But since the Focus was black, too, it don't tell us much."

"Analyze the paint. See what car company uses it."

"The insurance company isn't ready to go to that expense yet. And besides, if the SUV was a Ford product, it won't mean squat."

"What did the witness say about the SUV?"

"He said it might've been a Chevy Suburban or it might've been a Ford Expedition. Either way, it was humongous."

"And it just ran off after the accident—like the tractor-trailer?"

"Swung into the left lane ahead of our witness's car and vamoosed."

"So how do we tackle this thing?" I asked.

"Look for another witness."

"Fat chance of finding one."

"You know it and I know it, but as long as the insurance company is footing the bills, who cares?"

Well I did, for one. There's nothing more frustrating than chasing will-o'-the-wisps.

Lew sat his well-padded bottom on the edge of my desk. "Here's what we're going to do. There's people who for business or other reasons make regular trips on I-75. Corbin to Cincinnati, Knoxville to Detroit. People like that have their favorite pit stops—places where they always pull in and stretch their legs. So you're going to work the rest areas south of Lexington, and Larry"—one of our moonlighting cops— "is going to work the ones to the north. You're going to see if you can't find some regular—a truck driver, maybe—who witnessed the accident and saw the SUV."

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"What're you going to be doing, Lew?"

"I got a lot of paperwork to catch up on."

I thought: Not with the ponies running at Keeneland, you don't. But I didn't say it.

Lew let me use the company car. It was a little Neon, but he charged expenses on it to our clients as if it were a Lincoln Continental.

I rolled the windows down and headed south. Well, there were worse ways to spend a mild April afternoon, I thought. We were right in the middle of horse country, and there were well-kept paddocks with white fences around them and rolling wooded hills.

I thought, not for the first time, what a well-kept secret this part of the world is. The area north and south of the Ohio River, I mean. The Kentucky River with its deep rocky gorge, the steep, forested hills of southern Indiana, The Land Between the Lakes, the skyline of Cincinnati, particularly just after sunset when there's still a glow in the sky. Then there were the wonderful old Indian names for the rivers—the Great Miami and the Little Miami, the Wabash, the Kanawha, the Scioto, the two rivers that meet to form the Ohio: the Allegheny and the Monongahela. The Indians who inhabited this region were a bloodthirsty crew, but they invented place names that roll around the tongue like a shot of smooth Kentucky bourbon.

I drove on south to the first rest area and climbed out of the car. There's a technique to asking questions of complete strangers. If you just wade on in, half the time they'll brush on by. What you need is a hook, and photographs are the best hook ever invented. Hold one up, and people will generally look at it. And they'll answer any question you ask, even if it's only to mutter, "No, don't know anything about it."

I'd brought along a picture of Mrs. Li and a picture of her battered Honda. People will always look at a photo of a wreck, even if it's only out of the corner of the eye.

I set to work. From time to time I left my post beside the facilities and strolled on over to where the big rigs were parked. Truckers can go two ways—the ornery way or the talkative way—but at least with the photographs I had a way of breaking the ice.

Around four in the afternoon I took a break to chug a Coke. Then I made another stab at the truckers and, contrary to expectations, hit pay dirt.

The guy said: "Yeah, I saw that woman. Or at least, I think it was her. A lot of these Asians look alike to me. I saw her right here in this rest area. And about an hour and a half later, when the traffic began to move again, I drove past her mangled yellow car."

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He had blond hair that had mostly gone white and a face as seamed as a southern New Jersey road map.

"That poor woman—you know, she acted kind of strangely that night. For one thing, she walked her dog over here by the truck park instead of taking him out toward the woods there. I was fiddling with my trip record and I happened to glance in the side mirror and there was her dog hiking his leg against one of the tires of the next rig down. I felt like walking back and asking her how she'd feel if I hiked my leg against her car. Not that I had anything to do with that other rig—it was an Acme, I think."

That last bit lit up the pinball machine in my brain. Acme was the owner of the truck that'd been hit.

He went on. "I go back to my trip record and the next thing I know I hear that woman shouting in Chinese. I look in the side mirror again, and her mouth's hanging open like a gate, and just then the rig starts to pull out and almost clips her. She runs across the parking lot, dragging her dog behind her, and then, about a minute later, she whips on by in her yellow car—or anyway, I think it was her. Then right after that a big black Ford Expedition goes shooting after her. It was like everybody had just gone crazy or something."

I asked if he'd give me a written statement and, surprisingly, he didn't make any fuss about it. I stuck around another half an hour, then headed back to BGI. A black Ford Expedition, and it had taken off like a bat out of hell after the Honda.

But what was the reason? And why had Mrs. Li suddenly begun shouting in Chinese and then run hell for leather for her car?

I got back to the office around quarter of six. Lew was slumped at his desk with a can of Dr Pepper in front of him. It was a little soon for him to be back from Keeneland, but maybe the ponies had cleaned him out early.

He gave me his squinty-eyed Clint Eastwood look. Clint makes it come out mean and dangerous, but on Lew it just made him look like he needed a pair of glasses.

"You do any good today?" he asked.

I told him about Mrs. Li. I told him about the black SUV and the Acme tractor-trailer. I told him how all three had gone chasing off after one another.

"This is starting to look like more than an accident," he said.

"That's what I think, too, but I'm damned if I know what. Why did that woman start yelling in Chinese, for instance?"

"You sure it was her?"

"Who else would it have been? Her golden retriever?"

He thought about it a moment, then came up with a plan.

"Tomorrow I'm going to put Larry in that rest area and see if he can't roust out another witness or two."

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"What am I going to be doing?"

"Acme's located down in Rollsville. It's just a two-bit outfit, although I guess a couple of eighty-thousand-dollar rigs isn't *too* two-bit. Anyway, I want you to go down there and snoop around a little and see what you find. Tell the people there you're doing some follow-up work for the insurance adjustor."

"Can I use the Neon?"

"Yeah, go ahead. And one other thing, see if any of those people down there speaks Chinese."

"How am I going to do that?"

"Hell, Bill, you're a detective. Figure it out for yourself."

One look at Rufus and Maude Blaney, the proprietors of Acme Long Haul Trucking, and you knew that the only Chinese they spoke was "won ton" soup. And they probably mispronounced that.

Rollsville was about an eighty-minute drive down I-75 from Lexington. Acme wasn't in the town proper. It was located ten miles out a narrow, winding road with woooded ravines on one side of it and high hills on the other. I pulled up in front of the place and climbed out of the car and looked it over.

It was on an acre of land and had a chain-link fence around it and a cinder-block building in the middle of it. I counted two tractors in the lot, one of them with its front end hitched forward so that a mechanic could get at the engine.

I went through the wide-open gate and walked around to the tractor that was being worked on. A big, rawboned guy in gray coveralls was hunched over the engine. He looked up at me. He had electric blue eyes, the kind that tell you two things—namely, that the owner is mean and stupid.

"Bill Riley," I said.

The guy hard-eyed me. "You looking for him or is that you?"

I handed him a card. It said I was from the insurance company, not BGI.

He squinted at the card, then at me.

"What's this all about?"

"I got to take a look at the rig that got bent up."

"Somebody already did."

"Yes, but now I've got to do it, too."

"No wonder people's insurance rates are so high."

"Don't blame me. I'm just an employee."

"Go see Maude. She's in the office. She'll take you around."

I thanked him and headed off across the gravel toward the cinder-block building. As I did, I remembered to look around for the black SUV. All I saw was a battered Chevy pickup.

The guy working on the tractor had been Rufus Blaney. I'd

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caught that much from the nametag on his coveralls. Now I had my first encounter with Maude Blaney.

She sat behind a greasy metal desk, and there were a lot of yellow invoice forms on it. I caught sight of the logo printed on one of them. *Mangrove Tropical Sportswear.* If they had anything to do with Maude's current attire, they'd better keep quiet about it. It consisted of denim cutoffs, work boots, and a man's workshirt.

She looked up at me. She'd probably once been pretty in a honky-tonk sort of way, but Time had thrown a flying tackle at her and mashed her looks into the AstroTurf.

I tried a smile on her. "I'm Bill Riley. I'm with the insurance company."

"Don't you boys ever stop coming around?" she asked.

"It's part of the service."

"Well, it ain't much of a service for me, particularly since our own insurance company is completely different."

"You don't know. They might be interconnected. You'd be surprised."

"I'd be surprised if you boys ever pay off on our insurance claim."

"These things take time," I said.

"I wonder how much time it'd take if I complained to the state insurance commission."

"Look, I'm just here to look at the damage. Why don't you let me do that?"

She came out from behind the desk. She was big-breasted and big-assed, and she looked like if she put a shoulder to you, you'd go bouncing right across the floor.

I followed her outside and around the back of the building. There was a tractor parked there that I hadn't seen before, and it had a trailer attached to it.

"That's her," she said. "See what you can make of her."

I gave her a smile and got out a notebook and walked around to the rear of the trailer. Maude Blaney followed me and stood behind me as I squatted down.

"That a hearing aid in your ear?" she asked.

"Yes, it is."

"Tiny little rascal. I didn't know they made them that small."

"They do a lot of things these days."

"Except settle insurance claims."

I examined the trailer. The high bumper was pushed in a little and had yellow paint scrapings on it. There'd been some damage underneath, too, but not a whole lot. Hitting this thing with a Honda Civic was about like me hitting Mike Tyson with a jelly donut.

I made a lot of unnecessary notes. Maude Blaney got bored after a while and drifted away. I rose cautiously out of my squat. The

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rear doors of the trailer had a padlock on them, but it was hanging open. I slipped it out and laid it down on the gravel.

I eased open one of the rear doors, and sunlight flooded in and illuminated the interior of the trailer. I noticed the smell first. An antiseptic smell such as you encounter in a hospital. Somebody'd been swabbing the place out with something that had hypochlorite in it. Then I saw the cage. Not really a cage, I guess, but a chain-link barrier three-quarters of the way down the trailer. It had a padlocked gate and, inside, tier after tier of wooden shelves, each with about a foot and a half of space in between. I noticed something else. A white plastic drum with a lid on top. A chain ran around it and then through the links of the barrier. So it won't topple over, I thought.

Then a hand shot past me and slammed the door shut.

I had to jerk my hand back to keep it from getting crushed.

It was Maude Blaney, and she went eyeball-to-eyeball with me.

"What were you looking in there for?"

"I wanted to see if there was any interior damage."

"Well, there wasn't, and we didn't claim any, so you just keep your nose out of there. You damned insurance people—they ought to horsewhip the bunch of you."

"I'm just a gofer, Miz Blaney."

"Well, how about you go for the gate and leave us alone."

I took the hint and eased on out of there. Rufus raised up out of the truck engine and watched me as I went. Of the two of them, I think I would've rather tangled with him than his wife.

I asked a few questions in Rollsville. Everybody I talked to knew the Blaneys, but nobody had much to say about them. One old boy got a funny smile on his face when I mentioned Maude, and I wondered if, when he was younger, he hadn't enjoyed her favors in the back of a pickup truck somewhere.

I also asked about the black SUV. I got pointed in the direction of one, but it turned out to be a Toyota Land Cruiser.

I drove on back to Lexington, drinking Coke out of a can and puzzling about the cage I'd seen in the back of the trailer. Animals? Did they haul caged animals in that thing? But I knew that wasn't it. The plastic container proved it wasn't.

Damn, I thought. They're hauling people, and that container's so they've got a place to relieve themselves.

I went into Lew's office as soon as I got back to BGI, but he was on the phone. He waved me into a chair, then slid a sheet of paper across to me.

It was a printout from the Louisville *Courier*'s Web site, and it was headed *News from Indiana*. Louisville sat right across the Ohio from Indiana.

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I read a story about a small-town police scandal. I read a story about a school bond issue that was about to be voted on. And finally I read the story about the dead Chinaman who'd been found at a rest stop off I-64.

Bang. Tilt. That pinball machine in my head just about went ape.

The rest stop had no facilities. It was just a place for truckers and car drivers to pull off if they had to. And it was surrounded by National Forest land.

Some traveler from Missouri had gone back in the woods to relieve himself. He'd just zipped open his fly when he looked down and saw a naked foot sticking out of a pile of leaves. He'd raced back to the car and told his wife to call the cops on her cell phone. When the cops had finaly cleared away the leaves, they'd found a naked body underneath. An Asian, probably a Chinese. And when they'd autopsied him, there'd been a balled-up handkerchief stuffed halfway down his throat.

Lew put down the phone.

"You find out anything?" he questioned.

"They're hauling illegal immigrants. I saw the cage in the back of the truck where they put them. Then they probably pile a legitimate load in front of it to hide it."

"Damned right that's what they're doing," Lew said.

"How'd you figure it out?"

"A lot of ways. One was getting a copy of the statement Rufus Blaney, the driver of the truck, made to the state police when he got back to this area. He said he was hauling finished goods to an outfit in East St. Louis called *Mangrove Tropical Sportswear.*"

"I saw one of their invoices on Maude Blaney's desk."

"What's a garment factory doing in East St. Louis, Bill? All the garment factories in this country have picked up and moved to Guatemala or somewhere."

"Maybe it's just a warehouse," I ventured. But I knew it wasn't.

"You visit that place and I bet it's got a wall around it with barbed wire on the top. And if you managed a peak over that wall, I bet you'd see a guard with a big revolver on his hip and a pit bull for company."

"Sounds about right for East St. Louis."

"Sounds about right for a place where they're bringing illegal aliens and then making them pay for their trip from China by working them eighteen hours a day at a sewing machine. They probably got a dormitory somewhere in the building with boarded-up windows and sleeping mats on the floor. And the food's probably rice with a little pork in it and all the weak tea you can drink. And there won't be any other buildings close-by, and those that are will be so dilapidated that even the rats've deserted them."

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"What do you think happened to that Chinaman, Lew?"

"While you were futzing around down in Rollsville, I've had time to think this thing over, and this is how I put it together. They pick these people up somewhere remote—maybe a creek in the Great Dismal Swamp in North Carolina just off the Inland Waterway. Then they take them to where the truck's parked and dope them up somehow. Maybe they give them doctored food or something. That's to keep them from making any trouble during the trip. Then they load them up like cordwood and take off. Farther along they probably give them another dose of dope.

"Now here's what probably happened. That Chinaman that got himself killed came to a little early. Maybe he didn't get enough dope in him, or maybe he threw it up. Anyway he wakes up in the back of the truck and it's pitch black and everywhere he feels around him there's nothing but inert bodies. So he huddles there and he gets more and more frightened and finally, after hours and hours, the truck pulls over. He stays where he is waiting for something to happen. Then the truck engine starts, and he knows they're not going to let him out. So he starts screaming and here's what probably comes out: *They're all dead! Everyone but me! Get me out of here!"*

I said: "And just by chance Mrs. Li's standing right outside."

"And since she grew up in Taiwan, she understands every word. The truck pulls out. She runs for her car and takes out after it. Probably she wants to get the license-plate number so she can call it in to the police."

"But there's a black SUV riding shotgun," I said.

"Yeah, and I'd guess Maude Blaney was driving it. She's seen this Chinese woman standing beside the truck, and then the Chinese woman starts running around like she's nuts and Maude puts two and two together. So she catches up. She sees Mrs. Li has a cell phone in her hand and knows she's got to stop her right now. Well, this Maude's probably a pretty slick driver. Anybody that can handle a big truck can sure handle an SUV. So she moves on up and kisses bumpers and then steps on the gas and runs Mrs. Li right into the back of the trailer. Probably she had no intention of killing her. She just wanted to stop her using the cell phone. But she whacked her all right and almost whacked three other people in the bargain."

"What about the Chinaman? How'd he end up dead?"

"Figure it out, Bill. First chance they get they pull over someplace quiet. Then they climb into the back of the truck with a couple of pistols in their hands and hogtie the Chinaman. Stuff a wadded-up handkerchief in his mouth and slap a piece of duct tape over his lips. No more screams out of that fellow. Then, a couple of hours later, they stop over in Indiana and check on him and

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find he's choked to death on the handkerchief. So what do they do? They strip him naked so his clothes won't be a giveaway, and as soon as the coast is clear they haul his body out in the woods and cover it with leaves."

I thought about it. "It makes sense, Lew. But it's a hell of a stretch putting it together like this."

"I'm not saying it happened exactly the way I described. I could be way out on the details. But I bet *something* like that happened."

"So where do we go with this?"

"I want some photographs of that cage you saw."

I thought about Maude Blaney's seething eyes. "Fat chance of that."

"We'll get them all right. And as soon as we do, we'll gather up somebody from the insurance company and traipse on over to the State Patrol headquarters in Frankfort and lay it out for them. Then they can sort it out. And as far as how we came by the pictures, you took them this morning when Maude Blaney wasn't looking."

"I see where this is going, Lew, and I don't think I like it."

"After dark we're going to drive on down there and climb their fence and get inside that truck."

"What if they got a dog?"

"You seen one?"

"I saw Maude, and that was enough."

"We'll take a pound of hamburger along. I'll mash up some sleeping pills in it."

"What about the lock on the back of the truck?"

"We'll use a pair of bolt cutters on it."

I hesitated a moment. "Do I get overtime for this?"

"Sure. But not if we get caught and go to jail. Then you're on your own damned time."

I swung by the house and had supper and told Sarah that I'd be out on a job that night. Sarah, who works at a school for the deaf, indicated that she'd curl up with a good book and wait for me. I just hoped she wouldn't have to wait too long.

I drove over to Lew's place, and we piled in the company Neon and headed for Rollsville.

Lew said: "I wonder what this bunch gets for hauling illegal aliens."

"We could call up and ask."

"Somebody'll ask them, you can bet on that. But they'll be wearing badges when they do."

We reached Rollsville on schedule and turned off on the road that ran up to Acme Long Haul Trucking. About halfway along, Lew had me pull off on a gravel-and-dirt lay-by. Probably a road

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crew had put it there so they'd have someplace to park their equipment.

Lew got out the pound of hamburger and doctored it with mashed-up sleeping pills. He put enough in to cold-cock a horse, let alone a dog.

We got back in the car and drove the rest of the way to Acme. We parked around the next bend, then hoofed it back to the gate. It was padlocked, but we'd expected that. We worked our way around the perimeter of the fence to the rear of the lot. Since the area was choked with brush, I figured I'd end up with six kinds of poison ivy before we were through.

Lew stopped at one point and pounded on the fence. No pit bull came out to challenge us, and we moved on.

Finally Lew began using the bolt cutters on the fence. We bent it back and crawled through, me first, with the pound of hamburger in case the dog had just been playing possum. No flash of pointed teeth, no slop of savage saliva—just a curse from Lew as he ripped his pants leg on the fence.

"Somebody's going to pay for this," he muttered.

Probably the insurance company, I thought.

"Where's this rig of theirs?"

"Right there in the shadow of the building."

Lew took the lock off the back of the trailer with the bolt cutters, then heaved it over the fence into the woods. We climbed into the trailer. I shined my flashlight around. Everything looked the same as it had earlier that day.

"Look at that vent back there," Lew said. "That's probably where the Chinaman did his shouting."

He pointed out that the shelves had tick marks on them, each about twenty inches apart.

"They had them jammed in here like sardines. Just like on one of those old slave ships."

I'd toted the camera bag along from the car. I unzipped it and got out the powerful battery-powered lantern we kept there. I set it up so that it would illuminate the cage. Lew got out the camera, and a minute later the flash cubes began going off.

He used up two rolls of film just to be sure. Then we began packing up again. As we did, Lew said: "These people sure goosed the moose, you know it? Murder One for Mrs. Li, Murder Two or Manslaughter for the Chinaman, and who knows what all for all the other stuff they did—conspiracy and transporting illegal aliens and all that stuff. Well, maybe they'll be able to plea-bargain it all down to a hundred and twelve years."

I jumped off the back of the trailer with the camera bag and walked right into the twin barrels of the shotgun Maude Blaney was holding in her delicate hands. I let out a gasp that could've

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been heard in Texas. Rufus was there, too, and he had a mean-looking pistol in his hand.

"You can come on down, too," he said to Lew.

Lew jumped off the truck and stood there.

"See what's in that bag," Maude said

Rufus took it from me and unzipped it.

"Camera stuff."

"Well, we know what to do with that."

Rufus zipped the bag back up and tossed it to one side.

Maude said: "I guess you two know you're guilty of breaking and entering."

Lew kept his mouth shut. He had a look on his face like that of a dog who's tried to leap a fence and caught a certain part of its anatomy in the barbed wire.

"By rights," Maude said, "we could gun you down and nobody'd say a word."

"You can't do that," Lew managed. "We're unarmed."

"What about those bolt cutters leaning against the wheel of the trailer? After we shot you, we could wrap your hand around them and say you tried to jump us with them."

"Now, you don't want to do anything foolish," Lew said.

"How do you know we don't?"

Lew had no answer for that.

I thought about what Lew had said in the truck. Murder One, Murder Two. This pair was capable of foolishness all right. They were capable of cold-blooded murder.

"You two got a car?" Maude demanded.

"It's parked up the road," I said.

"It's the one we saw coming in," Rufus supplied.

"Which way's the hood pointed?"

"Toward Rollsville."

"Well, here's what you're going to do. You're going to walk out through the gate and drive on out of here. Ha, you thought we were going to shoot you, didn't you? Well, we will shoot you if you ever show your faces around here again."

"What about the camera?" Lew ventured.

"That's ours. And lucky we don't take your car, too, and make you walk. Now get moving."

Maude stood to one side, and I eased on past her and started walking toward the now open gate. Lew quickly joined me. I saw the black SUV then, parked just inside the fence. Humongous was right. They make them any bigger and they'll have to add an extra set of wheels.

I kept walking. Rufus and Maude had fallen in behind us, and at any second I expected them to blow us into the next galaxy.

As we got closer to the SUV, I noticed that the paint was wavy

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on the front bumper. A sure sign that it'd been repaired and repainted.

The Blaneys' footsteps halted behind us. That made me more nervous than if they'd continued. Finally, as we passed through the gate, I had to look back. Rufus had his back to us, listening as Maude hissed a message at him. I managed to lipread exactly three of her words—*know* and *kill* and *bastards*—but that was enough.

I caught up with Lew.

I said: "I lipread what Maude Blaney was saying back there, and here's what it comes down to: *They know too much. We got to kill the bastards.*"

He stopped in his tracks. "You sure about that?"

"You want to stick around and see?"

The SUV rumbled to life behind us, and Lew's feet got moving again.

We piled into the little Neon. I got the keys down from the visor and jammed them in the ignition and pulled out into the road. As we sped past the Acme place, the big headlights of the SUV swung out behind us and blazed blindingly through the rear window.

"Holy crap," Lew said.

I jammed the gas pedal to the floor. The SUV stayed right where it was—about a foot from our rear bumper.

"You ever hear of a tailgate party, Lew? Well, they're putting a whole new spin on the concept."

"They kiss our rear bumper and we'll go whipping right off this twisty road into a ravine."

"Yeah, and then they'll climb down with tire irons and make sure we never get out again."

Lew began fumbling with his cell phone. Fat chance that'd do us any good—not unless there was a county mountie around the next bend.

We rounded a sharp curve. The SUV had to fall back. Then it was right back on our bumper. I couldn't see who was driving—Maude or Rufus. Not that it mattered. Either of them was capable of making mincemeat out of us.

I kept waiting for the kiss of their rear bumper, but it didn't come. They got a place in mind where they're going to do it, I thought. A place where we'll for sure buy the farm.

I thought about the old .38 police special I kept locked in the bottom of a filing cabinet at work and hadn't even looked at since Michaelmas. As for Lew, he could've turned himself into a walking arsenal. He owned a MAC-10 and a Chinese-made AK-47 and a gnarly automatic that took a twenty-round clip. He even had an ankle-holster gun that fired .18-calibre ammunition. The trouble was, none of it was registered, and he was afraid to carry it in case

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he ran into a cop. So all we had between us was my Swiss Army pocketknife. Well, if they get close enough, I thought, I can always use the fold-out corkscrew on them.

The SUV stayed on our tail. It was almost as if they were playing with us.

Lew cast aside the cell phone.

He said: "That place where we pulled over to dope the hamburger."

"What about it?"

"It's right up ahead. When we get to it, jerk the wheel over and slam on the brakes."

I didn't ask what he had in mind. I was too busy trying to stay away from the SUV. And here came the lay-by—directly in front of us on the right.

I spun the wheel to the right, spun it back again, jammed on the brakes. The Neon did a tango, a schottische, and a Virginia reel, but somehow came to a stop in a cloud of dust and gravel.

Rufus, Maude, whoever was at the wheel of the SUV tried to follow us. Then he or she realized their mistake and whipped the wheel left and hit the brakes. That was how stupid the Blaneys had become with the need to kill us. That was how panicked they were at the idea we might get away.

One wheel on the gravel, three wheels on the pavement, the brake pedal jammed against the floorboards—it was the perfect scenario for a disaster. The front end danced, then the rear end spun clear around in a circle. I saw one of the front tires creep off its rim under the strain. Then the SUV slammed sideways into the guard rail on the other side of the road and rolled over it and went crash-banging into the ravine below.

We heard all of it. The breaking of glass, the rending of metal, the snapping of tree trunks. Then, after a final, almost comical tinkle, a dead silence—as if nothing had happened at all.

We climbed shakily out of the Neon. We peered down into the ravine. A single headlight gleamed in the darkness below. Then it winked once and went out.

"Acme Trucking," Lew mused. "Wasn't the Acme company the outfit that was always selling stuff to Wile E. Coyote in the Road Runner cartoons? You know, rocket belts and jet-powered roller skates and a lot of other things that didn't work? Well, it looks like this Acme outfit didn't work, either."

He lit a foul-smelling cigar, which was preferable to his other bad habit—chewing Red Man tobacco.

We waited for the cops to arrive. It took them a long time, and all the while I had to stand there and breathe Lew's secondhand cigar smoke. But that was probably better than what the Blaneys were breathing just then. ●

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